

Year C Sunday before Lent - Transfiguration

Change? We change whether we like it or not, we change all the time. By the time I sit down at the end of this sermon each of us will have in our bodies somewhere between 2.5 billion and 3 billion – yes 2.5 billion to 3 billion – new cells that we didn't have when I started.

So change is part of our life. Some of us are better at embracing change than others. When Markie my wife was working in the most deprived part of Edinburgh, more than most she welcomed changes in the way she did her job because she could see the benefits.

Or take the past two years. Many people have enjoyed the enforced switch to working from home as a result of the pandemic. On the other hand, many have hated the changes imposed on them and are deeply anxious about adapting to the new normal whatever that's going to look like.

And just as we change, whether we like it or not, in our everyday lives, so too we change when we encounter Jesus, as we have seen only too clearly over the past two months as we have journeyed from the Incarnation to the Transfiguration.

Everyone who came into contact with Jesus changed, from those who gave up everything to follow him, to Herod who resorted to infanticide, to those in his home town who tried to drive him off a cliff because of his refusal to do what they wanted.

And Jesus was changed by the Transfiguration too – certainly the way Luke tells the story. He went up the mountain to pray and came down reassured by Moses and Elijah, the two great representatives of the Law and the Prophets, that his departure or exodus on the hill of Calvary was all part of God's plan.

And of course, as Richard read in our first reading, Moses' face was so radiant when he came down from Mount Sinai after encountering God, in fact so radiant he had to put a veil over his face

The disciples too, well at least Peter, James and John were changed too. And why not? After all they had seen the glory of God – once they had managed to wake up. Peter broke the spell by suggesting they build three shelters and stay up on the mountain. Perhaps he was thinking of the Feast of Tabernacles, when of course building shelters was part of the feast.

And what happens? A cloud descends on the mountain – just as it did when Moses went up Mount Sinai – and God says to the disciples. "This is my son, whom I have chosen. Listen to him".

That in turn is reminiscent of Jesus's baptism when God spoke to Jesus from the heavens – the key difference this time being that the words were directed to Jesus' companions rather than Jesus himself.

'Listen to him' is I think one of the most important phrases in this entire passage. We are called to listen to Jesus, not to all the siren voices that constantly pull us in different directions. It's also, I think, as if God is also saying to the disciples that it's time to stop listening to Moses and Elijah, your heroes of the past. Times have changed, it's time to focus on Jesus and what he has to say.

The other really important word in this passage I would suggest is 'down'. Jesus and the disciples came down the mountain to re-engage with the world and all its troubles. Just as Jesus came down from heaven at the Incarnation to engage with us and lead us home. As I have said before and will no doubt say again, the story of the Bible is about God looking for us, not the other way round.

It's no coincidence that Luke, Matthew and Mark all end their versions of the Transfiguration with the story of Jesus coming down and healing the demon-possessed little boy.

It was as if the father of that boy was saying This is my beloved son, listen to him. And Jesus listened. And Jesus' voice of love and compassion drove out the voices of violence and anxiety that were making the little boy's life a nightmare

The wider point is that life isn't a permanent diet of mountain-top experiences, a diet of champagne and smoked salmon. Most of life is humdrum, messy, difficult, a diet of bangers, mashed potatoes and baked beans.

It's the highlights of life that give us the strength, the energy, the impetus to get out of bed on yet another dreary Monday morning to face another repetitive week. But that's just what they are – just highlights

The danger with mountain-top spirituality is that it runs the risk of separating the sacred from the ordinary, an artificial divide between the spiritual and the secular. As Richard Rohr says, the Incarnation gives the lie to the idea that matter and Spirit are completely separate.

And he's absolutely right. The problem is that we find it difficult to see God in the mundane, in the muck of our lives. Over these past two years, it's been hard to spot God in the excess deaths, in the loneliness and isolation endured by millions. And that's not to minimise the pain felt by those affected by illness and death, homelessness, unemployment, abuse, problems totally unrelated to COVID.

How can hardship be sacred? Yet this week's Gospel reading underlines Rohr's point – that God is found just as much in the messiness of everyday life as he is on the mountain top.

Our problem is that we like success, and we like to measure things. So we measure the strength and depth of our faith by the number of mountain top experiences we have. Have we felt we have been filled with the Spirit? Has Jesus spoken to us? How many of our prayers have been answered? We crave these things. If Peter can see Jesus in his glory, why can't we?

But is God more present at those moments than he is when we're doing the washing up, taking out the rubbish, making another fruitless telephone call to try to get the washing machine fixed? No, but because we crave the mountain top experience, we're in danger of missing God in the valley.

And that matters, because actually God spends most of his time in the valley. While Peter was trying to capture that fleeting glimpse of glory, to domesticate it, the reality is that God is getting down and dirty among the marginalised, the oppressed, those are literally hopeless, the broken, the sinful, the suffering. That's where God's compassion and mercy are fully revealed.

But we also need to remember that Peter, James and John didn't really understand what they had seen, which is why Jesus told them not to tell anyone. It was only after the resurrection that they could begin to understand what the Transfiguration was all about.

Even at the time of Jesus' arrest Peter's reaction was to cut off the ear of one of those sent to seize Jesus. He still hadn't understood that aggression is not the answer.

Just as Peter often didn't understand what Jesus was about, there is much we often still don't understand. But one thing we need to understand urgently is that we have a tendency to use God to justify our own desires.

How else can one explain the recent comments of the Russian Orthodox Patriarch, hours before his country invaded Ukraine, that the Russian Orthodox Church regarded Russia's armed forces as "actively manifesting evangelical love for neighbours"?

I struggle to find any justification for that attitude in the Gospels. Surely Jesus actively manifested evangelical love for neighbours by dying on the cross – the ultimate valley.

Returning to our specific Gospel reading, the experience of Peter, James and John on the mountain top didn't do them any good when it came to healing that poor boy. If we want to find God where he spends most of his time, that's where we have to spend most of our time. God isn't offering us permanent shelter on the mountain top, at least not this side of heaven.

We need to embrace both the mountain top and the valley, not denying either but accepting that those mountain top moments are gifts from God that we can do nothing to earn. But we can and should choose to listen to Jesus and follow him back into the valley. Because it is in the valley that we can most effectively be his hands and feet and be his messengers – which is what we are called to be to the best of our abilities, however great or small those abilities are.

As we leave the mountaintop of Epiphany and its brightness and move into the valley of Lent, we can't know what lies ahead – especially with all that is going on in Ukraine. All we do know is that whether it is mountain top or valley, champagne or cabbage, Jesus will be there because he is Lord of everything – of everything. The sacred has no boundaries.