

SERMON 3.3.2019 Transfiguration. Exodus 34: 29-end; Luke 9: 28-36

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

For those of you who are not familiar with the statues on the reredos behind me you might think that they represent saints, apostles and other dignitaries of the Christian Church, but they are all, with the exception of Mary Magdalen and Jesus in the top middle, Old Testament figures – prophets and kings. On the bottom row, fourth in from the end is Moses, holding the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments which he has brought down from Mount Sinai. On his head, strangely, are two horns. You may wonder why Moses should have two horns on his head. It all comes from a mistranslation of the Hebrew word *keren* from this morning's reading from Exodus. As we heard, when Moses had beheld the glory of God on Sinai his face 'shone' with rays of light. But the translator of the medieval Latin Vulgate, traditionally thought to have been St Jerome, misunderstood the Hebrew as indicating that Moses came down from the mountain with horns. And so this error was replicated in iconography throughout medieval art and sculpture.

What is clear, however, from the reading, is that Moses is indeed transfigured in some way by his encounter with the glory of the Lord. The onlookers can see it in his face. He is an eye-witness to the divine and it transforms him.

Three disciples are eyewitnesses to a moment of glory in our gospel passage. I wonder what it must have been like for the disciples to witness the great event of the transfiguration, which we heard re-told this morning. What was it like to be there? Jesus takes Peter, James and John up to a mountain top. There he is transfigured – he shines like the sun, his clothing becomes as white as the light and Moses and Elijah appear. If that were not enough for the astonished bystanders to comprehend, a voice from the cloud proclaims: "This is my son, my chosen. Listen to him." Very similar words that were uttered at Jesus's Baptism in the river Jordan – a significance no doubt not lost on the disciples there, and not lost on the reader of this gospel – words that declare with God's own authority that Jesus is the Son of God – a mystical, holy and earth-shattering event.

One of the disciples there was Peter. That most human of disciples with whom we often feel so sympathetic, portrayed as he is in the gospels as periodically putting his foot in it, saying the wrong thing or getting the wrong end of the stick. And one feels sympathy for him on the mountain top with Jesus. How was this fisherman going to respond to and interpret such an unearthly occasion?

Peter fumbles for something to say and makes one of his famous blunders, suggesting that "it's just as well we are here, as we can make shelters for the three of you" – an understandable, practical, vulnerable and human response. Yet even while he is speaking the voice of God breaks in: in the transfiguration of Jesus, heaven and earth meet – the glory of God is revealed and perceived, and the disciples' only possible response to is fall silently to the ground.

And yet the tale of the transfiguration *was* told and became part of the testimony of the early Church, after they had had time to reflect upon the resurrection. In our liturgical calendar, it is poised between the end of Epiphany and the beginning of

Lent. Thus, we look back to the glory of Christ's birth and now, before Ash Wednesday, we look forward to Lent, Christ's passion and, as Peter witnessed, Christ's glorious resurrection.

But how do we respond to Luke's account of the mountain-top transfiguration of Christ – a moment when our world is broken into by God's ineffable and unspeakable light, love, majesty and glory – a moment that verifies Jesus as the Son of God who dies for the salvation of the world, and is raised from the dead in glory. This is what we are being told. What do we do?

Peter himself gives us a guide. In his second epistle Peter urges his readers to make every effort to supplement their faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with affection and affection with love. So, yes, we aim for these things too. But we do this in the knowledge that we have been called to God's own glory: the glory revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai, the glory revealed in Jesus's transfiguration, the glory given to us as a free offering of God's loving grace, a glory that we shall one day witness with all its immense power. Therefore, we can go out today in the joyful knowledge that God's glory has been revealed, that Jesus has conquered sin and death, and that we are no longer children of darkness, but children of light. Therefore we pray with confidence to God, in our post-communion prayer later this morning: Send us out in the power of thy Spirit to live and work to thy praise and *glory*. Amen