

Sunday next before Lent – 11th February 2018

‘Listen to Him!’

The Feast of the Transfiguration on the 6th August in 1945, 73 years ago, was also marked by the dropping of the Atomic Bomb on Hiroshima, on that same day.

It was an event which is symbolised for ever, in the minds of many people, by the ‘Mushroom Cloud’ created by the bomb’s detonation.

The symbol of that cloud, overshadowing and embracing within it, the pain, suffering and devastation caused by its effect, on individuals together with the buildings and land. The Feast of the Transfiguration, still remains in the church’s annual calendar on the 6th August, but as it often occurs on a weekday, it is not always celebrated by the church at large, especially where weekday services are not part of the tradition of a particular parish.

This year it will fall on a Monday.

The account of the Transfiguration, is also recorded in Matthew and Luke’s Gospels, and it is a story of symbols.

There is the light, the witnesses, the cloud, the voice – four symbols which can still speak to us today.

But to see the event in its entirety we need to read the account of this event in each of those first three Gospels. It is a very ‘Trinitarian’ account, involving as it does, the bringing together of the Old and New Testaments, with Moses and Elijah and Jesus.

All three were persecuted by the authorities of the day. All three were involved in mountain side experiences, those of Sinai, Horeb and Hermon, the latter which is generally recognised as being the mountain where the Transfiguration occurred, and it is situated some 40 miles North of the Sea of Galilee, and a few miles from Caesarea Philippi, where Peter made his great confession of faith in answer to Jesus question to the disciples – ‘Who do you say that I am?’ to which Peter responded – ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’ Continuing this ‘Trinitarian’ theme, there are the three chosen disciples present, Peter, James and John.

And finally, we have the three synoptic Gospel accounts of this incident to reflect upon, Matthew, Mark and Luke. It also marks the turning point for Jesus, as he prepares to go up to Jerusalem for the last time.

As we now once again prepare to enter the season of Lent on Ash Wednesday in 3 days' time, it might also mark a turning point for each one of us in our own pilgrimage of faith, as we also prepare metaphorically to go up to Jerusalem to celebrate Easter Day and Jesus resurrection. The precise timing of this event – '6 days later' as recorded in both Matthew and Mark's Gospels, (eight days in Luke) clearly links it with Jesus' prophecy of his forthcoming suffering and death, as we find recorded in Matthew's Gospel, which took place at Caesarea Philippi. So, as we prepare for Lent, and our own journey to Easter, both individually and as a Parish, what might this passage be saying to us here today? And if asked by someone the same question that Jesus asked of Peter – 'Who do you say that I am?' I wonder how you would respond today. So, let us now return to the Gospel reading.

Firstly we see Jesus taking with him, not everyone, but those three particular disciples who have been with him at the healing of Jairus' daughter, and who would be close by him, in the Garden of Gethsemane.

For to those three was granted the privilege of such closeness to Jesus – recognition perhaps, of their importance by Jesus in the continuance of 'the church' after Jesus' death.

How important in the life of our church, both for its strength and its growth, do we believe it is, in our meeting in small groups, this year ecumenically, to share our faith and learn perhaps from others? (By the way, you still have time to sign up for the Lent course this year)

How important for the life of St. Andrew's, is the appointment of a new Rector in these coming weeks, but also the development of lay leadership, as we seek to grow and witness within our local community?

The churches where that growth has been seen, even here in our own diocese, are those supported by a strong network of 'House-Groups' meeting on a regular basis,

and then coming together on Sundays corporately, to worship together.

Secondly – the purpose for Jesus ‘away-day’ was to be apart. It is in the account in Luke’s Gospel that we have specific mention by the writer of that Gospel that Jesus went up the mountain ‘to pray’.

As with Moses and Elijah, Jesus needed to take himself away from the busy-ness, from the distractions around him, to be with and in, the presence of God.

So often we feel guilty if we are not actually doing something.

Thirdly – humanly speaking, many of us are like Peter – our understanding of events, on which we comment or make judgements, is often only partial; we don’t always have the full facts.

Peter was right of course –

‘It is well that we are here with you Lord’.

We would all I assume wish to say AMEN to that, but Peter didn’t really know what to make of it – this vision of Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus!

But it was not only Moses, the greatest ‘Law-giver’ or Elijah, the ‘greatest prophet’ – who witnessed to Jesus on that mountain side.

For the voice of God himself was heard, affirming Jesus in his ministry.

The luminous cloud, which descended on the mountain-side, had always formed part of Israel’s history - when for example the cloud led the people of Israel on their way during the Exodus.

There was the cloud, which covered the ‘Tent of the Meeting’ which meant that Moses could not enter the Tent because as we can read in the book of Exodus – (Chap 40 v 35) ‘The Glory of the Lord filled the temple’. And again, when Moses received the tablets containing the laws, it was in the cloud, that the Lord descended and spoke with Moses. (Exodus 34 v 5).

All through the Old Testament, there is this picture of the cloud in which the mysterious ‘Glory of God’ existed. And linking with the New Testament – and Jesus’ own baptism, we hear God saying in similar words –

‘This is my beloved Son – with whom I am well pleased.’
But the voice of God also said – **‘Listen to Him.’**
And in this comment is conveyed not only a need to
listen, but also to obey.

Bishop David Wilcox, a former Bishop of Dorking who
ordained me priest, often expressed our need of prayer in
our spiritual journey, but he also emphasised the need for
us at times to be still, so that we can hear God speaking to
us. So we need the silence. As the words of the fourth
verse of that great hymn – ‘Dear Lord and Father of
Mankind’ by J. B. Dykes, tells us –

*‘Drop thy still dews of quietness,
Till all our strivings cease;
Take from our souls the strain and stress,
And let our ordered lives confess,
The beauty of thy peace.’*

As Michael Ramsey, a former Archbishop of Canterbury
has said in his book – ‘Be still and know.’

*- When Jesus ascended the Mount of Transfiguration –
Mount Hermon – to be apart, he did not leave behind him*

the conflicts, but rather carried them with him up the mountain, so that they were transfigured with him'; right from his obedience in childhood, through to the final obedience of Gethsemane and Calvary.'

So, when we 'go apart' to be with God, which Lent affords each one of us the opportunity, if not the excuse, to wait on him, let us take with us all that is involved in our lives also. For in doing so we take it into a wider context, so that as recorded in Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians – *'We all, with unveiled face, beholding the Glory of the Lord, are being changed into His likeness – from one degree of Glory to another.'* (5.18)

All the frustrations and pain in our ministries, and in our own lives, can be transformed by our Lord.

Then, when the disciples had recovered from this experience, they were left with Jesus, alone.

For the disciples, the Transfiguration affirmed the 'uniqueness' of Jesus. Peter's desire to build three shelters is a misunderstanding of this 'uniqueness'.

Jesus is not in fact to be seen as one of the three!

For he is, the fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets,
as represented by Moses and Elijah, and not, their
continuation.

So now, as we prepare once again to begin our journey
through Lent, called by God, let us believe first like the
disciples that each one of us is special to God.

Secondly let us build into our lives this Lent, a time and
place when and where we can be apart with God.

And thirdly and perhaps most importantly let us -
‘Listen to him’.

AMEN

Peter Vickers – 11th February 2018