Sermon – Transfiguration 6th August 2023 St Godwald’s

The Feast of the Transfiguration that we celebrate today is one of the most significant manifestations of Jesus’ divine identity. Coincidentally, today is also Hiroshima Memorial Day: the transfiguration of our Creator juxtaposed with the disfiguration of God’s Creation. A poignant coincidence.

This evening, at the zoom service, we will recall the use of nuclear bombs in warfare, and pray that we might all work for peace.

But for now, let us spend some time with those mysterious, majestic, moments on the mountain, shared with Peter, James and John.

Littered throughout this narrative are hints as to why we should be taking this event very seriously. It takes place on a mountain (remember Sinai?); it positions Jesus in the same breath as Moses and Elijah (He keeps the best of company); it involves a few handpicked disciples, so often present at major moments of Jesus’ story, to be worthy of this moment; it recalls echoes of Jesus’ own baptism in the refrain: This is my Son, my Chosen, listen to him! Let us not be in any doubt: the transfiguration matters.

Yet, there is a sense in which events don’t appear to go to plan. The disciples are weary (the tiredness of Gethsemane anticipated perhaps?); and they misunderstand what is taking place, with Peter, especially, notably, making an enormous faux pas in suggesting that what is needed for such esteemed company is activity – the making of shelters - rather than simply lapping up the moment with their attentiveness (remember Mary and Martha – how slow we disciples are to learn).

From our first reading, from the second letter of Peter, we grasp that the significance of the transfiguration did eventually come home to Peter and his other eyewitnesses. If not on the day, then later, they did come to understand, the importance of what they had seen; and Peter urges the attentiveness he lacked on the mountain, upon the recipients of his letters, and indeed, therefore, upon us too. We are called to pay attention.

Those who know me well, know that I have to work hard to remain attentive; I am easily distracted; my incessant internal conversations can drown out the most engaging personality. Even when absorbed in a book – which I am frequently – I can find myself having to re-read chunks as my internal conversations create distracting noise from which I find it hard to escape. And modern life doesn’t help, surrounded as we are by noise, busyness, technological interruptions along with the more disturbing anxieties and fears, fuelled, often unnecessarily, by a media consumed by the latest news and gossip and keen that we should be equally consumed by it all.

Awake in the night I came downstairs earlier in the week to be greeted by a trio of slugs making their way across the kitchen floor. They were despatched swiftly without a moment’s thought; I did not take time to admire their translucent beauty, for here was God’s creation, contrary to our desires perhaps, but beautiful all the same.

In far easier days than ours, the first disciples struggled to remain attentive to Jesus. The early church understood the dangers, hence Peter’s candid advice: you will do well to be attentive to the prophetic message of Jesus as to a lamp shining in a dark place…

It is not easy, to remain attentive to something one cannot fully comprehend. We are surrounded by the majesty of creation every day and yet forget in a moment its source. We know the stories of Jesus well and, for most of us, have known these stories from childhood. Yet if I were to challenge myself to re-tell, say the story of Prodigal Son, would I capture every facet of that remarkable tale? What inaccuracies have I absorbed through decades of telling? Has over familiarity dulled my spiritual senses to the presence of the divine in the ordinary?

Spiritual openness is key to recapturing the innocence of the newly evangelised. When we hear scripture read in church or read it for ourselves at home, it is worth trying to approach it with the freshness of a first hearing. Some Christian traditions, like Iona, encourage this by declaring upon the announcement of the text: *Listen now for the Word of God.* In effect saying, sit up, God will now speak to you through the text if you are listening; listen well for you might hear something unexpected…

And quite often we do: we might hear a phrase, an emphasis, a nuance of meaning strike home for the first time. This is where having the words in front of us on our red sheets can be a huge help. Even the most familiar texts can speak to us with a fresh voice and sometimes an unknown text can hit home hard with words of revelation, consolation, challenge. The psalms especially are good for this. There is a reason we are encouraged to read them every day.

I enjoy Commonplace books for a similar reason – I have a number from famous writers like Evelyn Underhill or Henri Nouwen. A different short reading or quote for each day; it holds my attention long enough for me to hear something new. And it doesn’t call for a huge time commitment either.

Familiarity lends itself to over-thinking too. Rather than accept the simplicity of a parable’s message we seek to unveil layers of meaning and nuance. Our faith, in essence, at its heart, is very simple and very down to earth. When we think about the transfiguration let us not be swayed into thinking that this story is more complicated than it is.

The transfiguration isn’t magic; this isn’t a myth dressed up to persuade us of something that cannot otherwise be believed; you are not being asked to believe in the supernatural here, quite the opposite. Be attentive, Peter is suggesting, to the ordinariness of the divine, the ordinariness of the unexpected. And don’t be surprised at the narrowness of the space between life in this world and the next. As the disciples were shortly to discover, Jesus’ time on earth was fast drawing to a close, a closure that would unleash new possibilities they could not yet imagine.

Our expectations are dimmed by familiarity. A lifetime of church attendance can weaken our expectations of God’s revelation in our life, rather than sharpen our senses to see the divine reality amongst which we truly live.

Attentive to the extraordinary in the ordinary is what we will shortly explore once again in the Eucharist. The most ordinary of things – bread and wine – infused with the presence of Jesus, transformed for our transfiguration as we become partakers of Jesus the Christ in the world, through his grace, with his peace, emboldened and equipped by his love.

Here, in the most familiar of church rituals, is the transfiguration lived out for us once again. Be attentive Peter urges us; this isn’t magic, we are witnessing here, this isn’t make believe; this is reality, the reality of heaven meeting earth and uniting us with one another, the Kingdom, with Jesus.

Amen.