

Sunday 11th February, 2018 - 6th Sunday after Epiphany (last before Lent)

Year B

2 Kings 2:1-12

Psalm 50:1-6

2 Corinthians 4:3-12

Mark 9:2-9

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

The Sundays of Epiphany began 6 weeks ago with a story about a manifestation of Jesus' identity, but it was a much more covert incident: Jesus' baptism. In Mark's account of the baptism, it's not clear that anyone else sees the heavens slashed apart or the Holy Spirit diving down to Jesus. The voice from heaven is Jesus' alone to hear. Nothing is public. Nothing is obvious. Similarly, most of the epiphanies we get to experience in our own lives consist of glimpses, and sometimes we aren't even sure that they are really ours to see.

Today's Gospel which concludes our season of Epiphany - Mark's account of the Transfiguration - is a very different kind of a epiphany, however. Jesus becomes a beacon, like a lighthouse planted in the middle of the desert. The heavenly voice addresses all the witnesses: Peter, James, and John. On this Sunday, there is a promise that Jesus can and will be noticed. Epiphanies aren't always subtle.

So why is it that we celebrate this event every year, on the final Sunday in this season of Epiphany. Perhaps because it captures something of the key motif the season - the journey. I have already mentioned how the Baptism of Jesus served to introduce us to the season, as the Gospel passage for the first Sunday in Epiphany. But, of course, the season really began back on the 31st December, when you celebrated the coming of the Wise Ones, led by a star, to worship the Christ-child. There is a clear sense of journey contained within that story.

And now, the season draws to a close with this remarkable event - the Transfiguration - and it will be Jesus and his disciples who begin a journey of a different sort. A journey to Jerusalem; a journey that begins today...

All of this has me thinking about how the Transfiguration speaks to our own journey. And I think of what happened that day. Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up the mountain with him, and there he is changed - transfigured - dramatically before their eyes. Mark seems to struggle to find words to do justice to what happens. Jesus' clothes, he reports, became dazzling white, adding, "like no one on earth could make them."

It's as if Mark's saying, "No, you don't understand, it's whiter than white, more dazzling than dazzling, like nothing you've ever seen." And if this isn't enough, Jesus is then joined by two figures from the past, Moses and Elijah, representing the law and the prophets and, in this sense, the heart and essence of Israel's history.

What do you do with a moment like this? Peter doesn't know. But his offer to build booths isn't quite as odd or misplaced as it may initially seem. For elements of the Jewish tradition associated the "Day of the Lord" - that time when God would draw history to its climax and defeat Israel's enemies - with the Festival of Booths. And so Peter, taking the appearance of Moses and Elijah as the cue for this event, offers to build them booths. Peter, you see, has taken this momentous encounter with God's prophets and fitted it into a pre-existing narrative and religious framework that helps him make sense of this otherwise inexplicable and somewhat terrifying event.

Yet by doing so he comes perilously close to missing an encounter with God. For just after he stops speaking; almost interrupting him, in fact, a voice from heaven both announces and commands, "This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him!" Peter wants to fit what is happening into a plan. God invites him instead to experience the wonder and mystery of Jesus.

I wonder how often on our own journey we do the same. We desperately want an encounter with God - some sense that we are not alone, that there is something more than what we can see and touch - and yet in those very moments that God draws near we find ourselves afraid, unsure, and feeling suddenly very out of control and so we try to domesticate our experience of the Holy by fitting it into a plan.

Why? I suspect that as much as we want an encounter with God, we simultaneously fear the presence of God because we fear being changed, being transformed. What we have, who we are, may not be everything we want, but at least we know it, are used to it, have built a relatively orderly life around it. And so when God comes - perhaps not in a transfiguration as dramatic as Mark describes but in the ordinary hopes, encounters, and tragedies of our everyday life - when God comes and unsettles the orderly lives we've constructed we try to put those disruptive experiences back into line by cramming them into a plan.

But maybe, just maybe, there is no plan. Maybe there's only love. And perhaps our journey is not all about trying to discover some kind of "divine plan," but rather to create space for ourselves to experience the wonder and mystery of God - the sort of wonder portrayed in our Gospel passage today.

So at the end of it all, the Transfiguration, then, is not about the remoteness of God; not about the distance which exists between God and us. Rather, it is about the closeness; the imminence of God. The veil of heaven; the apparent barrier between earth and heaven; between God and creation is **not** the physical barrier that many imagine, or perhaps we experience on occasions.

Rather, God reaches into our life, into our existence, and seeks to share with us in our joy but also in our pain and our grief.

The bright light of the Transfiguration affirms life, a light that shines ahead into Lent to keep that coming season in perspective, so that we are never without hope and confidence. This light speaks a promise that God is here. And that God is knowable. God seeks relationship. Because God is life.

In just a few days we will soon have our own appearances altered, our faces slightly transfigured: we will receive the mark of ashes on our foreheads and will hear the words: “Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return”. In that moment we will begin the Lenten journey with Jesus; a journey that takes him to the destiny that awaits him in Jerusalem.

Today marks the end of a succession of Sundays that began with Epiphany. Epiphany, we recall, began with light: the light of a star leading the Magi to the Christ child; the light of Christ enlightening all the world. This week, as we mark the conclusion of this string of Sundays, we’ll end, as we began, with light: the light of Jesus’ radiant countenance on the mountaintop, a light that guides our path as we take up our cross, deny ourselves, and follow him.

It will be dark where we’re going. We’ll need the light.

In the name of God. Amen.