

St Thomas Sunday next before LENT 11 Feb 2018

Mark 9:2-9

With my thanks to all those whose sermon illustrations I've borrowed and adapted from various internet sources....

Do you remember those funny pixelated pictures that were all the rage. They were the ones that you stared at and by altering the focus of your eyes, get to see a picture hidden behind the mass of dots that were on the page. If you could see the picture, you've got a gift that I don't possess. There's several periods of twenty minutes staring in my life that I'm not going to get back again. Even when I looked in the paper the next day and they revealed what I was supposed to be seeing, I didn't get it. In fact I began to think that the whole thing was a con.

And here we are today, just before Lent and we hear one of the more puzzling passages from the Gospels. Jesus takes three of his disciples up the Mountain to pray and before their eyes he is transfigured. An aspect of this amazing person is revealed to the three disciples closest to Jesus. Or is it that they catch a glimpse the meaning of his life and his relationship to God?

Jesus takes just Peter, James and John to pray with him. They are heavy with sleep when they get to the top of the mountain. There's another obvious occasion where Jesus takes Peter, James and John to pray with him and they fall asleep. In a few weeks time we will be watching and waiting with the disciples in the garden of Gethsemane and perhaps there's a similar underlying message in the events and their account? Perhaps it shows something of the disciples' inability to comprehend Jesus. Here on the mountain they are woken up by the flashing light – the word used to describe Jesus' dazzling appearance is the same as that used to describe lightning. On the mountain top, the relationship of Jesus to His Father is revealed to them. The disciples are woken out of their ignorance, their sleeping, to see the light of Christ. You might argue that in the garden of Gethsemane, the same thing happens and the humanity of Christ is fully revealed to them. There they are woken up by Jesus to see him going to his death. Perhaps the sleeping is a metaphor for how difficult it really is comprehending who Jesus is?

There is a story told about Napoleon during the invasion of Russia. He somehow got separated from his men and was spotted by his enemies, the Russian Cossacks. They chased him through the winding streets. Running for his life Napoleon eventually ducked into a furrier's shop. Gasping for air and talking at the same time he begged the shopkeeper to save him. The furrier said, "Quick hide under this big pile of furs in the corner." Then the furrier made the pile even large by throwing more furs atop of Napoleon.

No sooner had he finished when the Russian Cossacks burst into the shop. "Where is he?" they demanded to know. The furrier denied knowing what they were talking about. Despite his protests the Russian Cossacks tore the shop apart trying to find Napoleon. They poked into the pile of furs with their swords but did not find him. They eventually gave up and left the shop.

After some time had past, Napoleon crept out from under the furs, unharmed. Shortly after Napoleon's personal guards came into the store. Before Napoleon left, the furrier asked, "Excuse me for asking this question of such a great man, but what was it like to be under the furs, knowing that the next moment could surely be your last?"

Napoleon became indignant. "How dare you ask such a question of the Emperor Napoleon?" Immediately he ordered his guards to blindfold the furrier and execute him. The furrier was dragged out of the shop, blindfolded and placed against the wall of the shop. The furrier could see nothing but he could hear the guards shuffling into a line and preparing their rifles. Then he heard Napoleon call out, "Ready!" In that moment a feeling the shopkeeper could not describe welled up with him. Tears poured down his cheeks. "Aim!" Suddenly the blindfold was stripped from his eyes. Napoleon stood before him. They were face to face and Napoleon said, "Now you know the answer to your question."

The lesson here is obvious: How can you describe a near death experience? You can't. It has to be experienced. In some ways, Jesus's transfiguration falls into the category of events that cannot be described. I think that is why the gospels say that they kept it to themselves and told no one what they had seen. But it's a cheap cop out to say that 'its all a mystery'. It's a key

moment in the Gospels. Matthew, Mark and Luke all tell the story and its mentioned in the Epistles too.

It's said that religion sometimes doesn't allow us to see things in different ways. Jewish people don't recognise that Jesus was the son of God, Protestants don't recognise the authority of the Pope, Baptists don't recognise each other when they bump into one another in the office.

Even if we approach an understanding of the transfiguration and how it tells us how the disciples learned about Christ's nature and role, it still leaves us with a puzzle about our own faith and spirituality. After all, unlike the furrer we've been given the clue, the puzzle is solved and we know what's about to happen and how its all going to end. We're looking at the pixelated picture with the solution in our other hand. But perhaps that pixelated picture of blobs and spots that don't seem to make any sense to me, is nearer our experience than we think? After all, how many lightening flashes of faith have we experienced where all is clear for a moment? And even for those of us who have those rare moments of glorious insight, most of us have to admit that our Christian life is often more about the ordinary than the extraordinary.

Henry Drummond, the Scottish theologian said, "God does not make the mountains in order to be inhabited. God does not make the mountaintops for us to live on the mountaintops. It is not God's desire that we live on the mountaintops. We only ascend to the heights to catch a broader vision of the earthly surroundings below. But we don't live there. We don't tarry there. The streams begin in the uplands, but these streams descend quickly to gladden the valleys below." The streams start in the mountaintops, but they come down to gladden the valleys below.

You and I experience the valleys of life. You and I both know what happens the next day coming down from the mountain. It is the real world and the real life. After Sundays of life, there are always Mondays.

Lent is a period of the churches year when we can try and get things in perspective. Whatever God does to reveal himself to us, whether its deep within the world of people and events and is hard (and sometimes seemingly impossible) to see, or perhaps revealing himself in blinding flashes of inspiration and insight, We can make an effort to study and read and pray

this Lent to deepen our faith in the living Lord as we prepare to see the events of the Passion unfold before us.