

Wheatley United Reformed Church
Sunday 2 March 2014 (Sunday before Lent, Year A)
Exodus 24.12-18; 1 Peter 1.16-21; Matthew 17.1-9
Psalm 2 or Psalm 99

We are not blessed with high mountains in this part of the world. The nearest to my house that we can manage is Brill, all 615 feet of it. I know it well, because my predecessor's widow still lives there, and the week before last I went to pick her up so that we could attend a funeral. Brigitte – that's her anglicized name – is a remarkable woman. Her father was a German judge who brought his family over the England in the mid-1930s when the Nazi government deprived him of his post for being Jewish. During the war she trained as an aircraft mechanic and later in life took up silversmithing. The house is down a rough track just below the windmill, next to fields. I arrived early, so it occurred to me that I should turn the car round to make our departure easier. I looked at the field behind me and it seemed quite grassy, so I began to back into it. I'm sure you've had those moments when as soon as you start to do something you realise it is a bad mistake. Well, the inevitable happened. The car got stuck in the mud, and every time I reversed in the hope that I could get some purchase on the ground I got stuck again. Brigitte came out to see me try again with some mats to put under the front wheels, and promptly fell on the mud, which is not a good idea when you are 91 and rather frail. But she did herself no harm and I lifted her up, with the warning that mud-wrestling at her age might not be a good idea. There was nothing for it but to call for help and wait to be rescued. We missed the service but managed to get to the committal.

Why am I telling you this? Today we have followed the disciples up a hill and they had an experience they could not understand. I was looking forward to the view across several counties from the windmill at the top of Brill, but instead I got stuck in the mud and all I could think of was how to get out. The disciples reached the top, the mists came down, yet they saw the teacher they had been following as they had never seen him before. All they could do in response was to suggest putting up some kind of memorial, rather like the tablet I once saw on the Watkin Path up Snowdon. It marked a speech made by Gladstone when he was prime minister for the fourth time, at the age of eighty-three, and it records that after he had spoken 'the multitude sang

Cymric hymns', rather like us this morning. Only this time it was to Moses and Elijah with whom Jesus appeared to have been conversing, and Welsh hymns had not yet been invented.

But I also wanted to tell you about another climb I made, just over two years ago, in the Argentinian Andes. You may have noticed that I am no longer in the first flush of youth, and I was more than a bit worried about the proposed hike. First, we had to walk five miles to the base of a mountain, and that meant there'd be another five miles back. Then there was a climb of 2200 feet up a very steep, loose, rocky track. I cursed all the way up and was on the verge of turning back more than once. Eventually it levelled out and there was another slog up a less steep slope to a rocky crest. But the reward was an amazing view of two glacial lakes, far beneath us; one frozen all over, the other shimmering blue, and above them the jagged, snow-covered peaks. All the effort and the cursing fell silent in that moment of raw, majestic beauty. We sat in contemplation for a long time, until it was time to make the long descent. Never was a pisco sour – the local tippie - in the hostel bar more welcome than when we eventually made it back. If my first story was all about hoping for a revelation and then getting stuck, this one was all about a hard, grinding slog followed by a revelation. But if I go on like this for too long you will begin to think that I have been listening to *Thought for the Day* too much or even the famous *Beyond the Fringe* sermon by Alan Bennett on the text 'My brother Esau is an hairy man, but I am a smooth man'. Sententious moralising based on episodes from the everyday life of a minister of religion is not my aim.

Both my experiences were paradoxical, though, in a way which may help to unlock some of the meaning of the Transfiguration narrative. In both of them expectations were undone. In the first, I had to wait for someone to rescue me. In the second, vision came after a hard grind. There's something of both in the Transfiguration: the ascent and the unexpected vision, but then a sense of bewilderment as to what had happened. Why do we read this story today? The liturgical year doesn't travel in straight lines. Through the season of Epiphany we have been following in the early steps of the ministry of Jesus, and the Transfiguration comes at roughly the half-way point. But next week, as Lent begins, we shall go backwards in time to the period

before that ministry began, then fast forward to the clouds which begin to gather as the opponents of Jesus try to trap him and then silence him. If I were in Alan Bennett spoof sermon mode, I would, of course, observe how like life that is – we rarely travel in straight lines and sometimes we need to go backwards in order to understand how we got to be where we are (unless you are stuck in the mud, when it may not be quite such a good idea); but enough of that. Instead, let's take a look at some of the more paradoxical elements in the account of the Transfiguration, in the hope that they will give us something to help us in our own ups and downs and our experiences of being stuck or of not knowing what to think or say.

In the life of faith we have somehow been seduced into thinking that all ascents should be easy, all views clear and all experiences compatible with belief. That is very odd. The great classics of the spiritual journey, from Augustine's *Confessions* through *The Cloud of Unknowing*, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *The Dark Night of the Soul*, not forgetting *The Pilgrim's Progress*, tell us that it is made out of many mistakes, failures and wrong turns, that it happens in cloud and darkness, and that we may get mired in the Slough of Despond or have to face down the Giant Despair. We know that there is nothing worth having or achieving which does not come with cost and effort; yet we often feel we have failed when we no longer see with the clarity we once thought we did, or struggle for words and search for explanations when asked to give an account of our faith or to understand why a God of love should permit so much suffering in the world. Well, I've got news for you and I hope it is good news; gospel, even. The greatest saints have stumbled along the way, and they assure us that God has the power to turn our wrong turnings and failures into the raw material of growth.

This is how it works. The disciples make their ascent and see Jesus transfigured and conversing with the greatest representatives of the Law and the prophets. They see him in a way which suggests that he is no ordinary mortal. You might think that this would lead to a wonderful certainty, but it doesn't. It brings confusion in its wake and it is Peter, as usual, the rock on whom the Church is built, who expresses it, in what in modern terms might be to commemorate the event by putting up some benches. Then something else happens: the paradoxical bright cloud comes, and out of it, the voice

which speaks the same words as when Jesus was baptized. The cloud and the voice in Jewish tradition represent the breaking in to life of the presence of the divine. The voice speaks exactly the same words as at the baptism of Jesus, but with two significant differences. Then, it seems that only Jesus heard it; now the disciples do too. And the voice adds the injunction ‘Listen to him!’ These are not accidental changes. Matthew wants us to make connections between these two moments: the first, when Jesus becomes aware that God is identifying him as his Son and calling him to ministry, and the second, when three of his disciples are told who he is and what they are to do. You might think that this would be a source of wonder and joy for them – at last we know the truth! - and you’d be wrong again. Instead, the disciples fall to the ground in terror. Jesus touches them, tells them to get up and to lose their fear; and everything is back as it was. No bright cloud, no Moses and Elijah, but the one with whom they have kept company, just as he always was. Except that nothing can be quite the same again.

‘Listen to him!’ The first two things Jesus says to them are ‘Don’t be afraid’ and ‘Don’t tell anyone about the vision until I am raised from the dead’. Perhaps they manage to lose their fear, but all they can do about his second command as they descend from the summit is to ask questions. The Jesus we talk about most these days is the one who challenges the powerful and shows God’s love to those who think they are too lacking in virtue to deserve it. But the Jesus of the Transfiguration shows us that something larger is afoot. He is a more mysterious character, in dialogue with Moses and Elijah and hinting at a resurrection to come. It is comforting to know that the disciples’ response is exactly what ours is: bewilderment, uncertainty, fear, questioning; and that this is the seedbed of faith. The moments in our lives when our eyes are opened to worlds beyond the everyday, or when God comes so close to us that faith is the natural response, are very rare. To understand the spiritual life as requiring that level of certainty is not the biblical way. Our muddles and our confusions, our doubts and our questions are with us all the time. We are not expected to lose them when we keep company with Jesus, but to listen to him as he helps us to look beyond them. I think it is significant that in the story it is the touch of Jesus which begins the process; the touch which frees us when we are stuck and supports us

when the going is hard. 'Get up and don't be afraid' are his words as much for us as for the fearful disciples on a mountain.

The first that happens when they come down the mountain is that a man with an epileptic son comes to Jesus begging him to heal the boy because the other disciples have been unable to cure him. This is the occasion when Jesus famously speaks of how the tiniest seed of faith can move mountains. Mountain-top visions are all very well, but what counts is removing the obstacles that are in the way of people's ability to flourish. And for that you don't need to understand everything, believe everything, or know every hidden truth; you need the touch of Jesus to call the seed within you to life: 'Get up; don't be afraid'. The seed must cast off its shell for the life it nurtures to be set free, to find nourishment and spring into growth towards the light. And that is the story we shall be following as Lent leads into Passiontide. A much darker cloud will descend on this man, and many voices will clamour for his death. The seed will die but the light and the love it contained will burst from the prison and touch the lives of those who long for a better way: 'Get up, and do not be afraid.'