

Wheatley United Reformed Church  
Sunday 2 March 2025 – Epiphany 7 (Year C)  
Transfiguration Sunday  
Exodus 34.29-35; Ps 99; 2 Cor 3.12-4.2; Luke 9.28-45

Seeing through things

They say you should never judge a book by its cover, or as the equivalent went when I was growing up, ‘never judge a sausage by its skin’. Try the book or the sausage out before you make any judgment about it. What looks attractive on the outside may turn out to disappoint, and vice versa. It’s a common enough human experience. How often have we created heroes, like Jimmy Saville, only to discover that they were monsters hiding in plain sight? How often do works of love go under the radar because the people who practise them aren’t looking for public acclaim? I’ve read books in dull covers which engrossed me and others with bright and attractive ones which left me cold. And eaten my fair share of sausages too, good, bad and indifferent, even though the skins all look the same to me.

As far as the first followers of Jesus of Nazareth knew when they began to follow him, he was simply a local boy, though one who said and did extraordinary things. What drew them to him were his compelling words about how to live the best kind of life and what God was like, and his astonishing ability to free people from whatever was holding them back. Maybe they sometimes wondered where all this came from, but they didn’t have any doctrines or creeds to tell them, they had to work it out for themselves, and quite often they got it wrong. That’s true for us too. What draws us to Jesus is the warmth of his humanity, his ability to see through appearances, his emphasis on the worth of every individual in the sight of God, including those who in the eyes of some are too unimportant or ordinary to bother with. All that, and the teaching which overturns so much of what we assume is how things must be, and how he gives himself so fully to those who come to him in need. And we don’t always get it right, or find doctrines and creeds helpful.

Until...Until one day on the top of a hill, when they see something different in him which they struggle to understand or articulate. Like many of you, I’ve been up quite a few mountains in my time, concentrating on putting one foot in front of another up

gruelling ascents then finding that exhaustion gives way to exhilaration once the ridge is reached and breathtaking views open out beneath you. I imagine it must have been tiring tramping the roads of Galilee and Judaea with Jesus, let alone climbing hills. Perhaps that's why, as Luke tells us, they began to nod off when they reached the top, rather as I may when I've done a stint in the garden and then sit down to watch TV. It's a strange and unsettling narrative, a mountain all of its own for us to climb, because it's hard too for us to understand what on earth (or in heaven) is going on.

How can we, as modern people, begin to make sense of it, let alone find meaning in it which lights up our own discipleship? It helps to know that it's full of echoes of older stories. There's Moses ascending into the clouds of mount Sinai to receive the Law from God, his face so radiant when he returns to base camp that he has to wear a veil. That, I think, is a way of saying that he has been changed by this encounter and that people notice it. Moses is there with Elijah – the Law and the Prophets together. There's a voice from heaven, as there is at the baptism of Jesus, soon after which the devil takes him up a high mountain and shows him the whole earth. 'You can have all that', he says, 'if only you will follow me'. There's no sign of that now.

Transfiguration is a posh way of saying a change in appearance. They see Jesus as they have not seen him before. When we are surprised by what someone we know says or does we sometimes say: 'I saw him, I saw her in a different light'. That's what happens here, literally and metaphorically. This can't just be some local boy with charisma, somehow he is connected with the whole history of God's dealings with his people/

Matthew, Mark and Luke all record this event and for each of them it represents a turning-point in the story. They agree that something happens to the appearance of Jesus, that the disciples are frightened and don't know what to make of it; that Peter babbles something about putting up three commemorative shelters; that a voice from heaven speaks from the cloud that comes down, as mists do over mountains. Matthew alone has Jesus touching them and telling them not to be afraid. Each of them follows it by the healing of an epileptic child when they come back down to earth. Luke adds his own touches, like the sleepy disciples, and most strikingly, something I've never noticed before, that Moses and Elijah speak with him about the exodus he was to fulfil

in Jerusalem. That is a word which pulsates with meaning in the Hebrew Scriptures. Moses was called by God to lead the children of Israel out of slavery in Egypt to freedom in a land of promise, the defining moment in their history and identity: the Magna Carta, Agincourt, the Spanish Armada and Dunkirk all rolled into one.

Then there's Elijah, the last of the prophets, taken up into heaven at the end of his life and believed to return before the Messiah comes. This language of glory, radiant faces, clouds and voices from heaven marks the moments in biblical narrative when the divine breaks into the human world most closely. But the exodus of which these heavenly figures are speaking is not, however, a triumphant one in which Jesus will lead a rebellion against the Romans and establish an independent Israel. It refers more darkly to what is going to happen to him – his arrest, his suffering, his death, and the resurrection which follows. The disciples don't want to hear talk like that. Just like us when we are in denial about something we fear, they bat it away. But this exodus of Jesus will become the defining character of the Christian faith and way: that what we see in Jesus is not simply a good man who has to pay the price for challenging entrenched authority; we see the best picture of God in terms we can understand because it is painted in the colours of our reality, our broken world, people's broken lives, great injustices and cruelty.

So it is that the radiant vision which perplexes the disciples is the moment when the destiny of Jesus becomes clear: a story of betrayal, suffering and death, which they cannot or will not understand. Moses, you may remember, died in sight of the promised land before he could cross into it. Elijah was hounded by Ahab and Jezebel for his opposition to their cruelty and greed and was taken up into heaven. The exodus of Jesus will take place through the Cross and the waters of death, yet, so Christians have always believed, it brings deliverance from fear and an assurance of the unquenchable power of love.

There could hardly be a greater contrast than between the ethereal vision on the mountain top and the episode which follows. An epileptic child is brought to Jesus by his desperate father and suffers a fit in front of everyone. Here is life in the raw, the convulsions and the foaming mouth, the pain of a parent helpless before their suffering child. We know, as people then did not, that epilepsy isn't caused by

demons, so the miracle of healing which Jesus performs can be hard for us to accept as it is recorded. Many years ago I was sent a book the title of which was ‘The miracles are also parables’, and I’ve always found it helpful to see that the miracle stories of the Gospels always point to a meaning beyond the literal text. Luke, like Matthew and Mark, is careful to connect the Transfiguration and the healing of the epileptic boy by telling us that they both caused a reaction of awe and wonder – a vision of glory which the disciples don’t understand, and a healing which makes the witnesses astonished at the greatness of God. You don’t have to go up a mountain and see strange sights to know the presence of God. You will find it just as much in all the mess of human existence, whenever hurt is being healed and evil confronted. And that’s an encouraging thought, because you and I may rarely if ever experience moments when we are unexpectedly aware of the glory of God shining around us, but we can all find them when God’s love is at work in the world and we see injustice challenged, the poor and needy lifted up, and human hurt tended and healed. That is also transfiguration, when divine love shines amid the pain and distress of human life and invites us to follow its example. And there is transfiguration too on the Table which is set out before us, when that whole story of sacrifice and resurrection power is told through such basic things as bread and wine and we are invited to taste and see.