**Transfiguration-Transformation**

*14 January 2021*

**Exodus 34:29-35**

**Mark 9:2-9**

The story of the Transfiguration is not an easy one. Mostly we don’t quite know what to do with it. It records an experience that we cannot easily identify with. On the whole we do not get this kind of revelation in our lives. I am told that visions of some kind or other do come to people even today, but if they do, people don’t talk about them too much for fear of being thought of a bit crazy. So, we don’t know how they deal with them, or how they are affected by them.

As for me, when I am confronted with the story of the Transfiguration I find myself still haunted by my childhood question about it: how did the disciples know that the other two figures appearing with Jesus were those of Moses and Elijah. They had no personal knowledge of these people, yet it is categorically stated they saw Elijah and Moses with Jesus. I know it is a frivolous question that only children would ask but the truth is no one has ever given me an answer to it. It was just one of those facts, we were told and we accepted them at face value, because they were in the Bible. But we do grow up and at some point, we just have to come to the conclusion that maybe the story is not to be understood literally, that there are some specific theological reasons the Gospel writers had in mind when they associated Jesus with these two giant historical figures from Israel’s past in this unusual, supernatural vision.

So, what could be those reasons? For whose benefit is the story told? Is it for Jesus, or for the disciples that the vision comes? Or for the world at large? Well, perhaps we can rule out the first and the last possibilities. Jesus had already heard the voice of God calling him the beloved Son at his baptism and he was made to understand that God was well pleased with him. It was in that assurance that he set out on his ministry and by the time the story reaches this mountaintop experience, he is getting to be known as someone special and a lot of guess work is going on about his true identity. As to the world at large, the three disciples present are specifically forbidden to tell anyone what they saw and heard, at least until after the resurrection. That leaves them, Peter, James and John. It must be for their benefit then that the vision comes. And it must be for the benefit of any future disciples of Jesus, like Mark’s immediate audience and like us. But do these three understand what it all means as they are coming down from the mountain with the vision of Moses and Elijah, Jesus clad in shining white surrounded by dazzling light and the divine voice ringing in their ears: ‘Listen to him!’ Do they understand? Do we understand?

What are they suppose to listen to? Haven’t they been listening to Jesus’ teaching for quite a while now? Surely, if anyone knows what Jesus is about, they are the ones! Wasn’t it Peter himself, who just in the previous chapter declared Jesus to be the Messiah, the promised One, who would be God’s saving Word for God’s people? This revelation shows just the kind of leader Peter and the rest of them had in mind. It is the Jesus of resurrection and ascension glory, who would restore Israel, redirect attention to its Laws and its prophetic tradition, signified by the appearance of Moses and Elijah and who, no doubt would include his disciples in the same glory. No wonder, they want to preserve the moment to make it permanent, even if they are terrified at the sight.

Yet, thinking all this, have they really listened to Jesus, or merely heard him? Igor Stravinsky, the famous Russian composer said something to the effect that ‘there is no merit in just hearing, even a duck can hear. But listening requires an effort’. Isn’t it interesting how we too often have trouble in listening in that sense? How we tend to hear what we want to hear and ignore the rest of what is said? Just think of how we hear the daily news. Some of us would say, ‘things are improving, we have the vaccine, soon we shall be back to normal’. Others would shake their heads and warn, ‘the vaccine is no panacea; what about the new variant viruses? The future looks bleak for quite awhile yet’.

It seems the disciples suffered from the same problem. They have heard the good news about the arrival of the Messiah, but they didn’t hear the words about the suffering and the Cross that would be inevitable for being a true messenger of God. They missed the point at Ceasarea Philippi and they were in danger of missing it again on the mountain of Transfiguration. In fact, according to some commentators the whole of Mark’s Gospel reflects and ongoing misunderstanding between Jesus and his disciples about the nature of God’s way to ‘salvation’. Don’t we fall in the same trap ourselves some times? When we think we know better what God should be doing and how? With great patience Jesus bears with the disciples as he works on their transformation from ‘know-it-all’ to true disciples, willing to listen and to learn. He gives them verbal explanations about his forthcoming suffering and rejection by the religious establishment. And now on the mountaintop the words are accompanied by a visual aid.

Elijah’s presence is not merely a representation of the prophetic tradition in general. It could be a direct reference to a prophecy in the Book of Malachi (4:5) which states that when Elijah comes back the Messiah won’t be far behind. In an extension of this tradition Elijah was believed to appear in times of trouble, to bring promise of relief, to lift the downcast spirits and to plant hope in the hearts of the down-trodden. So, here is Elijah, with all that his name entails pointing to Jesus as the true Liberator.

Furthermore, the shining glory of Jesus is a reminder to Mark’s Jewish audience of Moses’ shining face after his encounters with God. As we heard in our first reading it was so dazzling he had to veil his face before the people. The radiance of Moses’ face was a testament to the people that he indeed was God’s messenger and his words were those of God. In the same way the shining figure of Jesus is to re-affirm to the disciples that Jesus does speak with the voice of God even when he talks of suffering.

So what about us? What does this story tell us? Well, it does speak of God’s continuing faithfulness through the history of God’s people: from Moses to Elijah, from Elijah to Jesus. And we could continue the line of those, who since Jesus had also been called to sound the voice of God. We may think that in our own time there is no room for revelations like the Transfiguration. But according to Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, even in the modern or post-modern world, “when we may have changed the wavelength of our cultural radio, we can still hear the voice of God” (*The Persistence of Faith, 1991).*

The story of the Transfiguration then poses the question to us: are we tuned into the right wavelength on our multi-programmed cultural radio to hear the voice of God? We may hear the Prime Minister’s daily briefings in our news media, but can we hear the still, small voice of God? It still has to compete not just the Prime Minister’s voice but also with our natural inclinations and prejudices, with our childhood in-graved notions and pictures, with our inherited traditions and sophisticated ‘up-to-date’ notions, as it did 2000 years ago. Yet, thankfully, it still brings the same transforming hope which upholds us in our deepest troubles by sharing our cross, our suffering. And the next question, can we make the effort not just to hear that voice, but actually listen to it, work out the implications of it and act upon it?

Today is the last Sunday in the season of Epiphany. It is also Valentine’s Day and Racial Justice Sunday. Richard Becher, a minister of the URC in his inspired poem ‘*What kind of love do we believe in’* has found a way of connecting all these different threads as it addresses the disciples’ and our wish to preserve the ‘holy’ status quo. In conclusion I would like to quote just three verses of it:

*What kind of love*

*would it be*

*that lives on a mountain*

*far from the crowd*

*that only the strong can climb to receive...*

*What kind of love*

*can that be?*

***NOT THE LOVE OF OUR BELIEF***

...

*What kind of justice*

*would it be*

*that hides on a mountain*

*out of reach of so many*

*who are guilty of nothing*

*but whose voices are not heard...*

*What kind of justice*

*can that be?*

***NOT THE JUSTICE OF OUR BELIEF***

...

*What kind of World*

*would it be*

*balanced on a mountaintop*

*so far from the people*

*who are divided and broken*

*and at war with each other...*

*What kind of World*

*can that be?*

***NOT THE WORLD OF OUR BELIEF***

May the spirit of Christ bring us to a place of hearing and listening, revising our assumptions about God’s ways, understanding and acting in the name of God’s Love and Justice. Let it be so.

*Erna Stevenson*

*Amersham Free Church*