**Sermon for Sunday Before Lent: Mark 9:2-9. The Transfiguration.**

Mark 9:2–9 (NRSV)

92 Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, 3and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. 4And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. 5Then Peter said to Jesus, ‘Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.’ 6He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. 7Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!’ 8Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

9 As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

Sometimes we have an encounter with a person we have known that changes our perception of them. “I finally saw what they really were” we might say. Often this is a moment of revelation of the negative side of someone’s character, although sometimes we can be pleasantly surprised at how someone comes through and shows real character.

This episode from Mark’s gospel (It is also in Luke and Matthew) is usually referred to as the Transfiguration. It is a mysterious and strange moment, shared only with 3 companions Peter, James and John. No words from Jesus are recorded in the entire piece, and we are treated to an appearance from Elijah and Moses. What is going on?

First of all, it’s worth remembering that this comes immediately after the moment when Peter declares that Jesus is the Christ (Mk 8:29) – God’s anointed one. Jesus has just predicted his future sufferings, crucifixion and resurrection (8:31) and implied that his followers might be treated similarly (8:34-35). He has also predicted that some won’t die until they have seen the kingdom come with power (9:1). 6 days later we are up a mountain – probably Mount Hermon, which rises to over 9000ft above sea level.

You may have noticed that there are lots of ideas and images from the Old Testament here. Moses received the law, and Elijah was seen as the greatest of the prophets. Moses was buried by God, according to Deuteronomy 34 and some Jews in Jesus’ day believed he not actually died. Elijah was recorded in 2 Kings 2 to have been taken up into heaven on a chariot of fire. There were other important features about them too - they both had crucial encounters with God up a mountain. Like Jesus, Moses took 3 named companions up Mount Sinai (Exodus 24:1) – with 70 elders of Israel, and after 6 days God spoke to him from a cloud. Moses was also recorded as having a (temporarily) radiant face after meeting God (Ex 34:30).

Peter – never one to hold back – makes an offer to build shelters in the middle of all that is going on (9:5). People have wondered what his offer really means. Was he trying to make the experience more tangible or even permanent, or is he thinking of the Jewish Festival of Booths or sukkoth, or even of the Israelites in the days of Moses in the wilderness when they had a tent specially allocated as where God dwelt? We needn’t worry – no one responds to his offer and Mark simply notes he didn’t know what he was saying (9:6). That’s all the more significant when we take into account that Peter is generally regarded as the key source of information for Mark’s gospel.

The truth is that this incident is not about Peter or his companions; it is about Jesus. They are given a privileged glimpse of his true nature or as John Calvin put it “a temporary exhibition of his glory”. It is as if they have been given a taster of the resurrection to carry them through all that Jesus has foretold of what lies ahead. They have heard his predictions that although they hold him in such high esteem, he will be humiliated and killed. This moment gives them reason to hope and believe that their journey with him is not a futile one that will end in tears. And this is reinforced by the voice from heaven, which mirrors the voice at Jesus’ baptism. Then it was a message addressed to Jesus – “you are my Son”; this time the voice addresses the onlookers “this is my Son, listen to him”.

Sometimes we all need that – glimpses of light that give us hope that whatever difficult times we are in, they are not the end of the story. That can be an act of kindness in a time of sadness or depression, perhaps news of a vaccine in a time of pandemic. But for the disciples on that mountain, it was so much more than that. It was a sign that whatever they understood Jesus to be at that time, there was more to him than that, and he was part of a bigger story that extended back through the history of their people.

Mark’s gospel strangely records no resurrection appearances by Jesus in what is thought to be the original text of the Gospel; it ends with an empty tomb (16:8). However, this incident prompts a discussion between Jesus and his disciples about the resurrection as they descend the mountain (9:9-10) Perhaps Mark felt that no more needed to be said – the preview of the Transfiguration gives us all we need to know to place our faith and trust in Jesus.

Almighty Father,

whose Son was revealed in majesty

before he suffered death upon the cross:

give us grace to perceive his glory,

that we may be strengthened to suffer with him

and be changed into his likeness, from glory to glory;

who is alive and reigns with you,

in the unity of the Holy Spirit,

one God, now and for ever. Amen.