

Sermon for 2nd March 2025. Year C. The Transfiguration.

Exodus 34:29-35; 2 Cor 3:12-4:2; Luke 9:28-36 (37-43).

Preached at St John's Baillieston

Sermon

Once upon a time, there were two brothers who became Christians together as young men. The older brother took the faith very seriously, gave away much of the money he earned, and pursued a life of service to the poor. He sadly lost the only true love of his life, and, since he was poor, his health also suffered, and he died in his fifties, almost alone.

Now the younger brother found great success in business, married a beautiful wife and had three sons and two daughters. He had a comfortable house and many friends. He didn't take his faith too seriously, but he gave occasionally to charity, and he always worshipped on Sunday. Eventually, after a long and prosperous life into his eighties, he died with his wife and family gathered around him at his bedside.

In heaven, both brothers are called together by God, who warmly welcomes and embraces them and gives them an equal share in the Kingdom. At first, the older brother is surprised. After all, he had sacrificed everything to serve God, while his younger brother had enjoyed a comfortable and rather selfish life. However, his surprise was not resentful but joyous. "Today," he said, "my joy is complete, for we are together once again. Come my brother, let us break bread together". In response his brother said nothing, but fell at his feet, and wept over all the opportunities to show love that he had squandered.

This is a story I borrowed from Northern Irish philosopher Pete Rollins, and you may be wondering what its connection is with the Transfiguration. It's clearly a retelling of the Prodigal Son, though in this case the younger brother is

successful in business, doesn't repent during his lifetime, dies happy and comfortable, and yet the virtuous elder brother doesn't resent him for it. The connection with the Transfiguration comes in the transformation that occurs when the younger brother has his sudden epiphany about what God is really like, and it completely changes his perspective on everything else.

The big surprise is not that the younger brother gets into heaven – we might expect that of a forgiving, generous, loving God. The big surprise is that he receives the same reward as his much more holy brother, who, even more surprisingly, responds not with resentment but with joy, and it's this joyously loving reaction to God's unconditional generosity that causes the younger brother to see for the first time the overwhelming reality of the God of Love. In response, he falls to his knees as he suddenly realises just how much more good he could have done with the blessings he had been given, and just how much he has been forgiven.

The clearer we see God as God really is, the more we become like Jesus ourselves, full of love and kindness and generosity. If we believe we don't deserve love, unexpectedly receiving it can change us in an instant.

I wonder if there have been examples of this in your own life. Has anything ever happened to you that made you see everything that had gone before in a completely new way, so that you almost became a different person? Sometimes a novel can do this – at the end of a book you realise you're not the same as when you started.

The disciples Peter, James and John certainly have this sort of experience on the mountaintop with Jesus. Until this point, they have only seen Jesus as a human teacher and leader. They perhaps think he's going to lead a rebellion against the Romans and restore the spiritual virtues of ancient Israel. Like most of humanity, their attention was almost certainly on their everyday concerns and personal conflicts. They're determined to make Jesus the vehicle of their worldly

ambitions. Many global leaders today use Jesus in the same way – as a convenient tool to support or justify their own goals of power.

But Jesus' glory on the mountaintop rends the veil of their blinkered horizontal world from top to bottom. He makes the sign of the cross over the whole tapestry of history so that whatever we think is going on from our human perspective, God's glory breaks through reminding us that there is another, far greater, and yet far more humbling divine story going on.

Transfiguration is about the kingdom of heaven suddenly breaking into our despairing human world. Now we, like the disciples, are probably hoping that this will take the form of an army of glorious angels led by St Michael coming to destroy the evil tyrants now running amok in the world, but when the dawn from on high breaks upon us it is much more likely to be a realisation that we have received mercy, grace, or forgiveness that we didn't deserve. God could have sent legions of angels to destroy the Romans, but he didn't, he showed us what Love looks like, and when we witness it, we're left flabbergasted and shaken, just like Peter gabbling on about building dwellings and how good it is for them to be there. If we are not completely overwhelmed by awe and find ourselves gabbling nonsense in response to God, then we have not yet truly encountered God.

And so, after their experience on the mountain, the disciples Peter, James and John see Jesus in a completely different and divine light and their perspective on everything that Jesus is doing is changed. And it is the same for us. We too need to come to a realisation, an epiphany if you will, that Jesus is not only human but also divine, and that divinity defeats evil not with greater violence, strength and threats, but with grace, love, compassion and mercy.

And yet, even after experiencing the awe of transfiguration, our lives must still go on, in some ways changed, but in other ways perhaps not so much, at least not at first. James and John, who actually *witnessed* the transfiguration, who heard

God say, “This is my Son, my chosen, listen to him,” they later go to Jesus and ask to be seated at his left and his right hand in his glory, as if they’re J.D.Vance or Elon Musk. They were still completely missing the point: The glory comes not from omnipotent power, but from compassion, love and humility.

And while all this drama is going on up the mountainside, the other disciples are busily and unsuccessfully trying to cure a boy with seizures. None of them really understand that Jesus’ glory is not a matter of power, but the giving up of power, of humiliation, of going to the Cross, which is the inevitable consequence when God’s self-emptying love intersects with the distorted world of human ambition, with all its fear, hatred, greed, and violence.

Mountaintop experiences of grace and mercy transfigure and change us, but experiences must always end. Moses’ face shone when he returned from meeting with God, but eventually even that faded. Transfiguration loses its power if we don’t also come down the mountain and, like Jesus, respond humbly to the need we find before us.

The important thing then, is not the mountaintop experience of glory, but the transformed perspective it gives to us, and the knowledge that sometimes transfiguration occurs when and where we least expect it.

There is of course one transfiguration that we always share together, and it’s called the Eucharist. We gather together with our anxieties and fears; arm in arm we come to the table, and through the historical words of Jesus, the Holy Spirit is called down into the bread and wine, and we become Christ together, to be sent out in peace to love and to serve the world, as evil rages all around us.

So may *our* eyes now be opened to see God’s glory, the glory as of God’s beloved son, miraculously taking root and transfiguring our wounded and anxious hearts, here, now and always. Amen.