

Transfiguration

May the words of my mouth, and the thoughts of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer

Amen

This is a particularly tricky passage, because if we want to make sense of it we need to both understand the miracle of the Transfiguration AND understand the context and the wider message within which the story of the Transfiguration is placed. I think it is a real case of not seeing the wood for the trees, if you know that expression.

1. The Transfiguration itself – God’s Faithfulness

Briefly – stepping in close to the Transfiguration.. we find Mark underscoring God’s faithfulness. God made promises through His prophets, and by sending Jesus God is keeping His promises.

To a Jewish first century listener, the “cast of characters” is a first clue as to what is happening in this story. The two prophets – Moses and Elijah were believed by many Jews to be God’s precursors of the end times. God would send these two men of faith back to the world to inform humankind that God’s reign was at hand, to tell people that he was fulfilling all His promises. And here they were standing in this vision with Jesus.

Secondly, for Jewish first century AD listeners, Peter’s question about building dwellings pointed to the Feast of Tabernacles. Zechariah the prophet (14:16-21) states that God would usher in the new age, the “Day of the Lord,” during the Feast of Tabernacles. Embedded in this account are pointers to the imminent end times. Through this story, Mark is underscoring God’s faithfulness. God made promises through His prophets, and by sending Jesus God is keeping His promises.

2. The wider context of the transfiguration

But today I would like us to take a step back and start with a different question – which I think will help us understand more for such a time as this.

Who is Mark talking to?

First, look at verse 1. This isn't actually part of the lectionary reading today – I cheated and extended our reading to include it. Because I think it is important: Mark's listeners were eagerly waiting for the end of times. Jesus had told them that the Kingdom of God was coming with power, and despite everything, they were probably still waiting for an Old-Testament-Style end of the world with pyrotechnics and people rising from the dead and angels and stuff. After all, Jesus himself had promised that it was imminent – look at verse 1: "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power." Jesus was promising a really dramatic, firework enhanced end of the world ... wasn't He?

But at the time Mark was writing, that promise had been made some 30 years ago. I remind you that in the US a life sentence is 15 years. In the UK it is between 15 and 20 years ... Mark's first listeners had been waiting 30 years.

Rowan Williams reminds us that Mark was writing for a church baffled and fearful because the signs and the miracles – like those described in the story of the Transfiguration - were not coming thick and fast. What was coming thick and fast was persecution and a sense of failure. This is key to understanding what this passage is saying - Mark was writing into the life of communities experiencing fear and disorientation. Communities who might understandably be getting a bit impatient, wondering about whether what they had been promised was true. Maybe communities a bit like ours as we approach a year of lockdown ...

So how does Mark deal with this? He doesn't shy away from Jesus' promise – but he reframes it. He makes two comments, in a sense. Firstly he tells his

readers that manifestations of the Kingdom of God are just that – manifestations, not a continual sensory overload. See verse 8 “Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more ...”. This happened to Peter, it is going to happen to you and me.

Secondly, and more importantly, when he insists on secrecy, Jesus is telling his disciples – and He is telling us - “It is not about the miracle”. Instead, Jesus is challenging his listeners, he is challenging us, to recognize what is unique in his mission. Because that is more difficult than appreciating a firework display. Miracles are easy in comparison to understanding!

And what is that unique thing in Jesus’ mission? Relationship. He came to offer us a relationship with Him. To save us through that relationship. Jesus’ miraculous healings are always bound into a relationship, a relationship of trust, between him and the person healed. Mark is a gospel about relationship.

A relationship cannot come out of a miracle, out of raw power and authority, it is the other way around. It is out of the relationship with Jesus that the miracle comes. And so it is important not to focus on the miracle, or be blinded to what Jesus is actually doing because we are looking for a miracle. Focusing on the miracle is like looking at the packaging, not the gift. When we look at the miracle, we can’t see the wood for the trees ... Jesus knew that miracles risk creating misunderstanding – He didn’t come to perform miracles, and He didn’t want us to be distracted by them.

How like Mark’s original readers are we? More than you’d think. As we went into lockdown, about this time last year, I remember discussing how this might be a liminal moment. Richard Rohr wrote about it. I thought lockdown might be a moment of change, when our frenetic travelling would be forced to stop, when nature might recover, and when we might discover a different way of living, for the good of the world and society ... a sort of coming of the Kingdom of God. In a way I was expecting a miracle, a dramatic change.

Well, I don't know about you, but I'm a bit tired of waiting ... and its only been 12 months, not 30 years! I wanted a sudden change, I wanted a miracle, a mountaintop transfiguration! I wasn't wanting a slow, painful change.

But Mark tells me that our interactions with the Kingdom of God, even if dramatic, might seem fleeting, and will be interspersed with moments of nothing. "Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more ...". Mark tells me, paradoxically through this miracle of the Transfiguration ... that it is not about the miracle.

That is why the story of the transfiguration is not just about the transfiguration but equally about what is happening around the transfiguration.

The Jesus Mark describes tells us that we should not be hoping for a pyrotechnical miracle as a sign from God, but looking to our relationship with Him. It is through that relationship that, quietly and silently, unexpectedly, He is working in our hearts. God changes things from the heart of the human world, not by intervention from the sky, however much we might want this.

Amen