

Christ Church, Nazareth: Sunday 25th February 2018 Mark 9. 2-9

It is good to be with you this morning and to see Fr Nael Abu Rahmoun again. Today is a highlight of our pilgrimage worshipping again with the congregation, our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Today's Gospel reading is a challenging story, but a story of hope.

In Mark 9 we are at a turning point in Jesus's ministry. So far in Mark's Gospel we have followed Jesus as he moves about the Holy Land, healing, teaching and casting out evil spirits, gathering his disciples around him. At the end of Chapter 8, they are at last ready for him to pose that question that we all must answer, "who do you say that I am?" (Mk 8:29) And when Peter declares him to be the Messiah (Mk 8:29) he begins to teach them how he must undergo suffering, and how anyone who wants to follow must likewise take up the Cross. And any priest will know that many in the parish will what this means.

Then by the middle of Chapter 10, he is "on the road, going up to Jerusalem" (Mk 10:32) and the way is open to the Cross, and beyond to the Easter Revelation of the Empty Tomb. And every time we gather particularly on a Sunday we are an Easter people.

Now, at the start of Chapter 9, we are at the hinge between these two parts of the story.

Jesus goes up on a high mountain, alone with Peter, James and John, and there he is transfigured. And this afternoon with my fellow pilgrims we shall be ascending the summit of Mount Tabor, which

tradition associates with the Transfiguration of our Lord.

“Transfigured” - the word is not explained, and we are to learn only from the context what it means. The Greek is *metemorphothē*, and in English very similar - *metamorphosis*. Matthew uses the same word (Mt 17:2). Luke simply describes what happens (Lk 9:29). Jesus is changed. His clothes become unbelievably white - Luke adds that the appearance of his face changed (Lk 9:29) and Matthew says that his face “shone like the sun” (Mt 17:2). It a dramatic and unexpected event, for Peter, James and John are overcome with fear: it is something unendurable to look upon, something overwhelming and something powerful.

This is just what is so strange, and, for Peter, James and John, so terrifying, about the Transfiguration. For here, in the blink of an eye, in an overwhelming mysterious moment, they see Jesus in all his fullness - him in whom “all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.” (Col 1:19) For once they behold, not “the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon” (Mk 6:3 //) whom the people of Nazareth knew, and that was all they knew. Here, on the mountain, Peter, James and John see God the Son, “the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations.”

When Jesus is transfigured thus, they cannot look at him. The best Peter can manage is that suggestion that they should build three dwellings, for Jesus, Elijah and Moses. And remember, this is the same Peter on whom Jesus relies, whom he trusts; the same Peter who has had the presence of mind to see, what others have not seen, that

Jesus is the Messiah (Mk 8:29). Even Peter, the rock, has been overwhelmed.

Peter, James and John see not only a reflection, but God incarnate in all his fullness. No wonder they are amazed but this also is about the loving purposes of God being fully fulfilled and fully revealed in Jesus.

Then, in his mercy, God sends a cloud to soften and darken this overpowering light. From the cloud the disciples hear God's voice, declaring Jesus to be his Son. And from then on, inexorably Jesus's path to Calvary, and to glory, lies open before him; a path on which the disciples will follow him as far as their courage allows.

The story of the transfiguration is an alarming one, if we enter fully into it, "for indeed our God is a consuming fire." (Heb 12:29) However it is also, at root, as is the whole story of Jesus Christ, a story of glory and hope.

One thing we can take away from it is that, though we are not able to behold it face to face, everything, everywhere, forever, is filled with the glory of God. For a moment the clouds part and we see it - and are dazzled.

So, what shall we make of this story, though, in our own lives, as we seek to live Christ's risen life ever more fully? How is God speaking to us through this story? And how will he use it to journey through the penitential season of Lent?

In this story there is both seeing and hearing. First there is seeing - or not seeing. The disciples look on their transfigured Lord and it drives them out of their wits; the light is too bright; they try to do something about it and they fail. Then God lets a soothing cloud come down upon them; in the cloud they hear God's voice. And it is a beautiful voice and beautiful words. And what does God say? "This is my son, the Beloved; listen to him!" (Mk 9:7)

Seeing is often something we do before we act, before we grasp, before we plan. Hearing is different: we hear the word and obey it. We shouldn't make a hard and fast distinction. Our seeing can be good and our hearing can lead us wrong. However, as we make our Lenten journey I do want to commend this story of the cloud descending, shading our eyes from the light, so that we can hear God, and listen to his Son, the beloved.

For there is something very powerful about listening. It is in listening, pre-eminently, that we make ourselves available for others, that we submit ourselves to that which is beyond us. We listen and learn. We hear and obey. Jesus Christ is the living Word of God, and our task is

It is in listening that we cultivate humility. After all, in order to point a finger at someone else, we have to see them. When we listen, instead, we are more and more ready to recognise our own faults, rather than point to the failings of others.

As we listen the still small voice of calm, the voice of Christ speaking in our hearts, we turn outward, and in our generous, attentive listening, we give ourselves to others. We listen to the world around

us. We listen for God, longing to discern his purposes for us. We listen to one another, to forge the harmony of a strong community. And we listen and look beyond ourselves, giving ourselves to others in our listening and looking.

So, in this season of Lent may our listening lead us deeper into God's life. May the calm and soothing cloud descend upon us, and may we hear and obey God's voice: "This is my son, the Beloved; listen to him!" (Mk 9:7)