

## The Second Sunday of Lent

*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, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then 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.' He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!' Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.*

*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. So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead could mean.*

The account of the Transfiguration of our Lord comes at a vital turning point in the Gospel story. Our Lord has just ended his relatively popular ministry in Galilee, and is about to start a journey to Jerusalem and death. St Peter has just declared that he believes Jesus to be the Messiah, and Jesus has just begun to explain to his disciples that messiahship means betrayal and death, not glory and fame.

And it is at this crucial point in his ministry that he and three of his disciples go up a mountain to pray. While he is praying, St Mark says, his appearance is altered, and his clothes become a dazzling white. No wonder the disciples do not know whether they are awake or asleep, and they keep quiet about it afterwards. It's almost too strange to believe. The reason it has happened, though, is quite simple. It is to clarify Jesus' identity and to cement his identity for the tasks ahead. The disciples had just received a jolt – shocking news. Jesus was the Messiah but he was not the kind of Messiah that they had previously thought. Rather than fame and fortune, his was to be the path of ignominy, suffering and death. Was he therefore the Messiah? Could they believe anything he had said. Their world was shaken. They were in need of reassurance. The reassurance, this confirmation of who he really was, was provided for them in the Transfiguration. Similarly, it comes as a reassurance for us who are in the midst of our Lenten journey which will culminate in the events of Passiontide, Holy Week and Easter.

In the vision on that hill top the disciples see Moses and Elijah. Moses was the great lawgiver in the history of the people of God and Elijah was the greatest of the prophets. Their presence together shows that Jesus is much more than a Galilean carpenter with a way with words and with a healing touch. He is the fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets; the long awaited Messiah. Also, one thing that people forget, is that both of these, Moses and Elijah, were themselves associated with rejection and suffering. It is as though they are underlining both that Jesus is the Messiah and that his path of suffering is affirmed.

As if to seal this point, a strange cloud descends upon the assembled group. In Holy Scripture, clouds such as this mean one thing – the awesome presence of God. It is meant to remind the reader of the giving of the commandments in the Old Testament, when just such a cloud descended on the mountaintop, and the glory of the Lord 'was like a consuming fire. Jesus represents a new Law, a new commandment, anointed by God himself for the task.

As we go through Lent, and towards the crucifixion, we are about to be confronted with some of the most faith-stretching parts of the Christian story. We will stand at the foot of the Cross, and in front of the empty tomb, and reflect deeply on what they mean. Faith is seldom a question of lining up the facts and making a cold-hearted decision. Christianity asks us to believe the most unbelievable things, and therefore a little bit of imagination, even hot-headed passion, is required. Not the kind of imagination and passion which makes the untrue believable, but that which makes the unbelievable true.

The Gospel writers want us to comprehend the breadth of the identity of our Lord: to see who he really is and what that means for each of us. However rational and level-headed we are, we all have moments when God asks us to declare our faith in his impossible story. We pray, therefore, for God's gift of passion and imagination so that when the moment comes we will be able to respond with words of wonder and worship.