

The Feast of the Transfiguration

Zoom service talk on Sunday 8th August 2021, by Ian Totterdell, churchwarden

Today's readings all link to the experience that was given to the apostles Peter, James and John towards the end of Jesus's ministry: the Transfiguration, when (at least some of) Jesus's heavenly glory was revealed to his closest companions and God affirmed Jesus as his beloved Son. The Gospel reading gives St Luke's account of the event; Peter refers to the experience in his letter; and centuries earlier the prophet Daniel was given a vision of God's throne and one "like a human being" (who we understand was Jesus) being given glory and everlasting kingship. But what effect did the experience of the Transfiguration have on those who saw it?

A few days before seeing Jesus be transfigured Peter had declared that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of Almighty God. Peter had come to this conviction during three or so years of sharing Jesus's life and seeing first-hand the power he had to heal and forgive as well as the love and compassion for the sick and the poor that drove him to use it. That showed that God was with Jesus, and working through him, but it would also have been apparent that Jesus was really a human being, in need of rest and food like everyone else. The Transfiguration showed clearly to Peter, James and John the full extent of Jesus's connection to his Heavenly Father, which is just as true as his humanity (and his connection to us). It is central to our understanding of who Jesus is that he is both God and Human.

Such direct evidence of God's glory (which also is Jesus's glory) is rarely given to anyone living in the world - though we know we will see it clearly after we have died. Moses was given a glimpse of God (of God's back, to be precise) and his face shone afterwards; Isaiah and Daniel were given visions of God on his throne (and John writes of a similar vision in his Revelation); and Peter, James and John saw Jesus's glory in this Transfiguration. In all cases it was an overwhelming experience: Isaiah became very aware of his own sinfulness and how unworthy he was, while straight-talking Peter is reduced to incoherent speech. Might this be why so few are allowed to see the full glory of God? Of the 12 Apostles, only three were given this privilege; perhaps the others were not ready for it. But perhaps more revealing is the long-term effect it had on those who experienced it: Moses led the Israelites through the wilderness to the very edge of the Promised Land; Isaiah and Daniel faithfully prophesied to the people in difficult circumstances; and those three Apostles led the early church and two of them were killed for it.

But while God does reveal himself in this way at certain times to certain people, we must remember that the principal way God has revealed himself is in the person of Jesus, born as one of us, living alongside us and dying for us. All that immense glory has not got in the way of God acting with humility, intimacy and deep compassion to bring healing to us and to restore us to his Kingdom. God's son willingly put it all aside ("Emptied himself of all but love", as the Wesley hymn "And can it be" says) and lived a life of poverty and service. The Transfiguration gives us a glimpse of just how much he did put aside.

It can be hard to hold both of Jesus's natures, human and divine, in our minds and hearts as we pray and worship. Sometimes a gospel reading will portray him as a good and wise person who could be living next door, while at other times our church services might make him seem far above us. Both are true, but neither is the full picture. It is truly amazing that God not only acts to bring us back to him but does so by making his son become one of us. In a similar way, when we do God's work here in St Thomas parish, it is not only our human action but also God himself working through us by his Holy Spirit. And that makes me feel truly humble!