

The Sunday next before Lent 2023 – The Transfiguration – Year A – Mt. 17.1-9

In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke the Transfiguration marks a turning point in Jesus' ministry. It marks the end of the Galilean ministry and ushers in his journey to Jerusalem. He will go down to Jericho in order to go up to Jerusalem. He descends one mountain in order to ascend another mountain that of Mount Zion on which Jerusalem is built. We will encounter the motif of descent and ascension again. At Easter Christ descends to the dead in order to free those who have gone before him from their bondage in Sheol (the Jewish concept of the afterlife) to finally ascend to sit on the right hand of our Heavenly Father.

The above is taken from a sermon I preached in 2016. Then I focussed on fulfilment. Jesus does not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets, but to fulfil them in the sense of 'to complete them'.

On Tuesday 7th February 9 persons of 23 set out at 1.30 in the morning on a bitterly cold day, it was minus 6 Celsius, to ascend to the top of Mount Sinai, also known as Mount Horeb: the mountain of Moses, where Moses (he with the Egyptian name) first received the Ten Commandments. Why? It was a long held wish of some of those who have joined in the Christ Church pilgrimages with Biblische Reisen over the years. The places we have visited are all Biblical except for one. They are The Holy Land (twice), The Seven Churches in present day Turkey mentioned in the Book of Revelation, Jordan, Greece and Constantinople present day Istanbul. This year we added Egypt tracing the Biblical presence of the Hebrew people in Egypt and latterly the Holy Family. We also encountered the Coptic church in Old Cairo, as well as on the right bank of the Nile, where

the Holy Family supposedly crossed over to return to Canaan, but also in the monasteries of St Paul of Thebes and St Anthony of Egypt in the desert. We also visited an impoverished Coptic village alongside the banks of the Nile, where St Anthony of Egypt retreated to, only to be told by God that where he had retreated to was a place for people and not a place of retreat – nor a place for a hermitage. There we celebrated Holy Communion. We also visited a hospital in one of the slum areas of Cairo, which ministers to the garbage people of the sprawling city of 32 million, who sort Cairo's garbage – 90% of these people are Christian. In the Old Egyptian Museum on Tahrir Square we saw the first recorded mention of the Israelites on a pharaonic Egyptian stele. On our way to Mount Sinai we traced one of the routes the Israelites may have taken as they fled Pharaonic Egypt for the Promised Land, this route taking us alongside the Gulf of Suez and through the valley that leads to St Catherine's monastery and Mount Sinai.

If I were asked in Cairo for directions to Mount Sinai, I could now give an answer. Head east and take the road out of Cairo in the direction of the Suez Canal. When you get to the Suez Canal take the tunnel. On leaving the tunnel and passing through the security check turn right immediately and head south along the Gulf of Suez. After 200 kilometres turn left and drive for another 90 kilometres inland when you will see a sign to St Catherine's monastery, which lies at the foot of Mount Sinai and voilà! You are there! It's simple.

Were we who ascended Mount Sinai given the Ten Commandments? Did we converse with Moses and Elijah? Did we experience a theophany - a manifestation of God? To the first two questions the answer is a straightforward no. Concerning the third question one can't be so sure as a person of faith,

unless one easily, happily and willingly bows simply to describing the natural phenomena we encountered. It would suffice. It would even satisfy. It was amazing.

What awaited us at the top of the mountain on a bitterly cold morning with a strong wind blowing, which we had been sheltered from for most of the ascent, was not a brilliant sunrise, although the night's ascent had been in the light of a waning full moon that made torches/flashlights unnecessary. At the top of the mountain what we encountered was a deep red silver line on the right as the sun rose and on the left the blue and yellow of the sun. The sun itself remained hidden by what I described as a canopy or Himmelszelt that emanated out of the east in the form of a long and widening shaft of cloud. In the valley and above the valley and above the mountain ridge in the distance the mist was whirling and twirling, due to the gusts of wind affording a display of stupendous movement of ascending and descending mist. It was awesome and it was beautiful, but in a way that none of us would have anticipated or even imagined. Indeed it was more, because it was so unusual/extraordinary. It was other. Did I descend the mountain with my face aglow? Well, I must confess that I did. The rest of the day my face was aglow from the wind that had 'burnt' my face. Into the evening although the day had started early I was fully awake to living. Was the long coach/bus journey to Cairo and back worth the experience? Definitely. Would I go again? Sure.

One commentator, Eric Barreto of Princeton, reflecting on the ending of the Transfiguration begins with Jesus touching Peter, James and John while insisting that we must not miss this detail of Jesus touching the disciples and

understanding it as an embodiment of Jesus' compassionate, healing, and courage-inducing touch. Barreto writes,

'But Jesus touches Peter, James and John and asks them not to fear, showing them a scene now more ordinary than numinous. The world has gone back to what it was. No prophets of old. No audible divine voice. No light emanating from Jesus' face. The world has gone back to what it was. But the disciples cannot return to the same world as they descend from this mount. They have been changed.'

Two Sundays ago Jesus, as part of the Sermon on the Mount, said to those who follow that they are to be salt and light that they might bring light to the darkness, while preserving what is good and exorcising that which is contrary to God's good purposes. This being salt and light is not going to be easy and it will have to be in the everyday of our lives, 'The world has gone back to what it was.'

A little while back I had reason to speak with a nun. What struck me during our conversation was the way she saw the world, different from my own way of seeing it, while drawing on the same resources to a large extent. Hers was a world and an everyday life full of miracles. Everything it seemed was for her a miracle. There is much to commend in seeing the world in this way, even the 'small things' take on importance meaning that nothing is taken for granted, the ordinary is seen as extraordinary, even the 'small things' are seen as a gift, and so the heart and mind become saturated in gratitude, in thankfulness and praise, which is indeed a vocation of the Christian, 'It is indeed right, it is our duty and our joy, at all times and in all places to give you thanks and praise, ...' But for many people everyday life is a struggle and that is where they must contend.

As we draw to a close, having ventured to touch on the awesomeness of The Transfiguration, possibly having allowed ourselves to be touched by Jesus in our fear, we need to set the Transfiguration within its biblical setting. Earlier Peter has confessed Jesus as the Messiah, but when Jesus in response to Peter's confession predicts his death Peter rebukes Jesus, and in turn is rebuked by Jesus. The Transfiguration in this sense is given so that the disciples might have strength to face without fear what lies ahead and know that Jesus not only stands in the tradition of the Law and the Prophets, but that salvation, redemption, atonement is worked out in everyday life. Informed through and carried by moments of illumination. Every spiritual high in my experience is always followed by what our commentator observes:

The world has gone back to what it was. No prophets of old. No audible divine voice. No light emanating from Jesus' face. The world has gone back to what it was. But the disciples cannot return to the same world as they descend from this mount. They have been changed.'

Now, facing the transition to everyday life, they are sustained by their encounter to give heed to the divine voice, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!'