

What words came to mind when we read the account of 'the Transfiguration' ?

Weird..scary..mysterious..supernatural..awesome..amazing..puzzling..I just don't know!

If we find ourselves lost for words to describe it, then take heart from Peter, who saw it all unfold and was speechless with fear.

To try to make sense of this seemingly strange event, it helps to notice where it comes in Mark's gospel and that is in the middle.

Up to this point, the disciples have followed Jesus and seen him teach, heal, forgive and do miraculous things, like calming storms and feeding thousands of mouths from a small amount of food. Six days earlier, at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked, "Who do you say I am?" and Peter replies, "You are the Christ," the name which stood for all the traditional expectations of the Messiah, bringing perhaps trumpets? banners? publicity? But no: Jesus began to teach that he, the Son of Man, must be rejected, put to death and rise to life.

After the mountain top, Jesus talks more of his dying and rising : both warning the disciples of and taking the road ahead to Jerusalem, where chief priests and death sentences, crowds and crosses were waiting. Follow me, yes but on a road that means letting go of the world's ideas of status and power and glory.

In the middle is Mark's account of the Transfiguration, which vividly describes something beyond our mortal perception that seems to be a glimpse of the reality of the divine. The glory of God dazzles white like the glare from the sun and God speaks from within the cloud. Jesus is his Son, sent by him and fully of him. Yet a few weeks later he hangs on the cross, emptying himself in death. This is the radical nature of the love God for us.

Try looking at the Transfiguration through the eyes of Jesus...

He had made the decision to go to Jerusalem and accept the way of the cross, but he had to be absolutely sure that it was the right thing to do.

Moses and Elijah are two of the greats in Jewish history - Moses the law giver and Elijah the first and greatest of the prophets. They saw in Jesus all that they had longed and hoped for, and in meeting with him they were saying, yes, you are on the right way because all history has been leading up to the cross.

What will you have me do? must have been Jesus oft repeated prayer to his father. On the mountain God speaks his affirmation - yes you are my beloved son and you are to be listened to. Your chosen way of service and love is good and to be followed by all your disciples.

What did the Transfiguration bring to the disciples?

An experience like no other up to that point in their journey with Jesus. They witnessed him in conversation with prominent but long dead figures from their faith history... they saw Jesus' appearance change in a way that couldn't be duplicated on earth... they heard the very voice of God declaring Jesus' identity.

Scared out of their wits is probably an understatement and goes a long way to explain Peter's inappropriate offer to build shelters for Jesus, Moses and Elijah, although it's typical of his act first, think later character! Maybe he wanted to capture the moment with memorials as his ancestors had often done in places of meeting with God.

The disciples were certainly baffled. None of it made sense, least of all when Jesus insisted they weren't to tell anyone about what they'd just seen. Maybe their experience of God's glory and presence on the mountain gave them something to hold on to in the dark days ahead.

We might reflect on the significance of Moses and Elijah, remembering their stories. When they were discouraged and afraid, both met God on mountain tops and were sent back to face their difficult situations.

What can the Transfiguration bring to us?

It may still feel like one of the strangest stories of Jesus life, perhaps because transfiguration is not a word in common use. Transformation gets somewhere near it, and particularly if we imagine the snowy days we've had recently, when the countryside around has been transformed overnight into a glistening white wonderland. I wonder why we puzzle so much over the Transfiguration whilst we more happily talk of Jesus rising from the dead? Both things are extraordinary but are why we we worship Jesus and he is the Son of God!

Peter, James and John experienced the 'glory' of God in such an intense and unexpected way that they seem to have struggled to describe it- there's no great detail in Mark's account. Have we ever had such an experience or do we find the word 'glory' hard to get our minds around? Perhaps asking about particular moments when we've felt really close to God is easier to voice or thinking about our most recent 'wow' moment makes more sense. Have we kept those moments a secret, have we told others about them, and what does God want us to do as a result of having them?

The disciples carried their Transfiguration experience with them as they journeyed with Jesus, through the heartbreak of his death and the bewilderment then utter joy of the resurrection.

Perhaps these words we often sing express what they and we believe...

From heaven you came, helpless babe,
entered our world, Your glory veiled,
not to be served but to serve,
and give Your life so that we might live.

So God loved me...a poem to finish because it is 14th February...

God didn't send me a Valentine
He sent me His Son.
God didn't write 'I love you' on a beautiful card,
He wrote it on all creation - sky, sun, flowers,
And He wrote it across history in His blood.

God didn't draw a heart, pierced by an arrow,
But His own body broken, and His blood poured out for me.
God didn't say, 'I love you dear, in spite of your faults',
He said 'I take your faults on my own self...

And in my body I crucify them
So that I love you without faults
Clothed in the righteousness of my Son'.

So God loved me.

Lesley Brown