



The Avenue Uniting Church

Sunday 11th February, 2024

"Transfiguration"

Mark's Story of Transfiguration

Mark 9:2-9

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 bright, such as no one on earth could brighten 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 set up three tents: 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.

Contemporary Reading of Grace

"Listen to Him"

(Ken Rookes)

The formal introduction came
a long time after the man had made his presence felt.
And seen. And heard.
Years into his work,
following countless greetings and welcomings,
not to mention the embracings and dinings,
the friendings and cryings.

By then they knew that the man was different.
Speaking in riddles of the GOD he called "Father",
he had talked of life, unusual and free,
and of living with defiance and generosity.
He called it discipleship. They called it strange.

Still they stayed with him,
faithful in their own way; eager to learn,
and to be part of the kingdom of which he often spoke.

That day, the three men climbed the mountain
with the man they thought they knew,
only to be dazzled, clouded, and have him formally introduced.
"*This is the beloved, my Son*" an invisible someone said with solemn pride.
"*Listen to him.*"



This is a story that matters to Mark and his Gospel! And I believe it matters that we attend to his story of the transfiguration.

It's not simply there to emphasise Jesus' authority, or to affirm that he's up there with the 'big boys' of the people's faith history. That's a big part of it, certainly, but there's way more to it than that. The dazzling appearance, the clothes whiter than any earthly figure could make them... These symbols are here to spell out that, in some deep and unfathomable way, heaven and earth come together in this figure Jesus.

This is a huge statement of faith for Mark, embracing both what he can see in an earthly sense in Jesus, and that which can only be experienced as holy mystery.

The nature of this mystery doesn't make sense for Mark by itself. He needs to 'ground' it, by placing it within the history of Jesus' people - Mark's people too. In the symbolic presence of Moses and Elijah, Mark draws their story from the past into the present. Perhaps in doing so he's affirming that the nature and presence of Yahweh, hidden ('veiled') in Moses and Elijah's stories, is being revealed in Jesus. We can't know that for sure, but I wouldn't be surprised...

But for Mark, there's still more to say. He and his people know how the stories of Elijah and Moses played out: the gospel now looks back from Mark's time to show how the Jesus story unfolded.

Mark's Gospel is often called a "*Passion narrative with a long introduction*".

This is a way of saying that to understand Jesus' death, it was necessary to attend to the life that brought him to Calvary. Without the life that he lived, and the way he lived it, Jesus' death makes little sense, and so how Mark crafts his Gospel demands our attention. As best we can, we need to see each story within the bigger picture of the Gospel.

Here we see a story of Jesus firmly identified within the story of GOD's people Israel. And then, shockingly, Mark links it with Jesus' teaching about his future treatment at the hands of the authorities: religious and Roman!. This, of course, makes no sense to his disciples. Nor is it meant to do so, within the narrative flow (big picture) of Mark's gospel. They're not meant to understand at that point; it only makes sense later.

What it does do, is to make clear that stories such as the transfiguration are not meant to be seen in isolation from the other stories in the gospel. Or to put it another way, the 'glorification' type stories, are not meant to be seen in isolation from the 'earthier' stories. Each give complexity and meaning to the other.

The transfiguration story is a vital part of the picture of Jesus. But if that's the only picture of him we allow, then we are left with a very one dimensional Jesus.

For Mark, the holiness of the transfiguration story is enhanced by the story of Jesus touching a man with leprosy, for instance, or a woman with a debilitating menstrual flow... or even Peter's dead Mother in law! It's enhanced by the stories he tells, by the people with whom he associates, by the way he challenged the authorities, claiming to speak for Yahweh.

And if I may be so presumptuous as to suggest why Jesus is critical of the religious leaders, I think this is part of it: that they fail to acknowledge that holiness is about engagement with ordinary life and people, rather than standing aloof from them, and thinking GOD is somewhere else.

Perhaps most profoundly for me, is the moment of Jesus' death, when Mark tells us that the Temple curtain is torn apart. GOD is revealed: not behind the curtain, but out on the cross with the naked man killed by 'empire'. (Mk 15:8)

Transfiguration needs the other stories. Together, they tell that the one in whom GOD was seen in an extraordinary way, understood how that presence was to be lived out. It's important that we try to attend to the fuller picture we have, of the way that led Jesus throughout his life, right up to the cross. In attending to the stories together, I think we can more deeply see and experience the holy life we call "GOD" in Jesus.

Sometimes I'm able to follow, to be like him even. Often his example shames me. But mostly I also hear a word of grace in that life, calling me to try again next time!

For me, this week, this is the gift of the 'constant and wonderful' Jesus: constant in the way of love, and the insistence that this is the way of GOD, and "wonder-full", in touching the reality of human life, and touching the heavens!

For this gift, I give thanks.

Amen