

SERMON FOR THE LAST SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY (Cape Town - 1 February 2009)

Text: ¹ After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. ² There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. ³ Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. ⁴ Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters - one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." ⁵ While he was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" ⁶ When the disciples heard this, they fell face down to the ground, terrified. ⁷ But Jesus came and touched them. "Get up," he said. "Don't be afraid." ⁸ When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus. ⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, "Don't tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead." (Matthew 17:1-9)

In reflecting on this passage there are two aspects we need to give special attention to. The one is the transfiguration of Jesus and the other is the context in which it takes place.

It is definitely not easy to determine from a historical perspective what exactly happened during the transfiguration. The word itself means that there is a "change of appearance". But this is not something that we really experience on a daily basis. The only change of appearance that we might see in another person is a change in facial expression: Anger may be followed by radiant joy, sorrow by a pleasant surprise. But that is not what is being testified here.

The disciples of Jesus testify that for a moment there was a total change of appearance. The human like form of Jesus was suddenly transfigured to reveal his divine nature. For a short moment they say him in all of his glory.

As I have indicated, a "transfiguration" can hardly be subjected to human research. One of the reasons is that this is an experience confined to a few. It just doesn't happen that God reveals his glory to the masses and that we, as researchers, can proceed with a comparative analysis. It is always just individuals. We see this throughout the Scriptures.

God revealed his glory once to Moses. He called him onto Mount Sinai to present him with the Law. But the rest of the Israelites had to stay behind. And on that mountain (we don't even get the details) Moses experienced God's glory. Just being in God's presence caused Moses' face to shine like the sun. When he came down from the mountain, the people were frightened by his appearance. In fact, when they came to speak to Moses, he had to put a veil over his face, until eventually God's glory started to fade.

The prophet Elijah had a similar experience with God. But again he was an individual. And right at the end of the Bible John, the author of the book of Revelation, encountered Jesus on the island of Patmos in all of his divine glory. He writes: "**His head and hair were white like ... snow. His eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze in a burning furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing water. And his face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance**" (2:13-17). On seeing this, John just fell to the ground.

But as noted, it was always just a few that were privileged to see God's glory unveiled. I don't know "why?" But all we have is the "word" of these witnesses. Right at the beginning of John's Gospel we read: "**The word became flesh and made his dwelling amongst us... and we saw his glory**" (1:14). And each time it happened it was both an uplifting and a frightening experience.

The transfiguration of Jesus was seen by "three" disciples only, no more. We don't know what exactly happened. But Jesus had taken them on a mountain... and there in front of their eyes he was transfigured. Up to that point they had just seen this man from Nazareth who walked with

them and talked to them. But for a moment on that mountain the veil came off. And there Jesus was in his *divine glory*. We read (similar to Revelation): ***“His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light.”***

And as the disciples marveled at what transpired before them, they saw two others with Jesus: Moses and Elijah... and they were talking. It doesn't say “what” they were talking about. But “Moses” was synonymous with the “Law of Israel” in which God had revealed himself to his people, but also condemned them. And Elijah in turn was the greatest of all prophets who all had prophesied the arrival of a Messiah, the Son of Man.

And here they were. For the disciples the puzzle pieces between “old” and “new”, prophecies and their fulfilment, began to fall together. Peter, John and James were so excited, they wanted to capture the moment for ever. Peter said to Jesus: ***“If you wish, I will put up three shelters... three tents (and you can just stay here on the mountain all the time)”***. But his words are cut short by a cloud that settles on the mountain. And the voice of God is heard saying: ***“This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!”***

I want to draw your attention now to the context. The context is the imminent “cross”. I want you to look at the cross here in our church. And then just for a moment imagine the suffering body of Jesus on that cross, the crown of thorns on his head, the nails in his hands ... and then hear again these words: ***“This my son, whom I love; and with him I well pleased”***.

On the day of Jesus' transfiguration the disciples were as yet not aware of the cross. What they had seen so far, was a normal man like you and me. He laughed, he cried. He became hungry and tired. And what awaited them in the next few weeks as they traveled to Jerusalem, was not a sight of “increased glory”. On the contrary, what awaited them was a sight that would disturb and deeply shake them. The sight was that of which the prophet Isaiah had written: ***“He had no beauty or majesty... he was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their face”*** (53:3-4). That was the disciples' forté. A man so normal, that he gets rejected.

Once before the disciples had heard who Jesus really was. It happened at Jesus' baptism. When he walked out of the water, a voice from heaven said: ***“This is my son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased”*** (Mt.3:17). The very same words as in our passage. But once the everydayness of Jesus' life returned, these words were soon challenged. It already happened in the desert when Jesus was tempted by the devil: ***“If you are the son of God, tell these stones to become bread”*** (Mt.4:3). ***“If you are the son of God, throw yourself down (from the temple)”*** (Mt.4:6).

And these words resonate even today, sometimes in our own hearts. If you are... if Jesus actually is the Son of God, well in that case I will commit my life to him, in that case I might worship him more regularly!

If you are the Son of God?!!! In this tension we live our faith. But there were witnesses. ***“We saw his glory ... the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”***

The three disciples of Jesus saw it on the mountain. And indeed it was a moment of grace, as noted, *just before the passion of Jesus started*. There was no glory there. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus shook in fear for what awaited him. Seemingly helplessly the soldiers captured him. The High Priest spat in his face. They chastised him and the onlookers roared in laughter. They mocked him and nailed him naked to the cross. And his own disciples faltered.

Peter saw *his glory*, but he denied knowing Jesus.

How is it possible? One answer is: They didn't really listen. On the mountain the voice had said: **"This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"** Just before the transfiguration Jesus had already predicted his death. But the disciples didn't listen. They were still waiting for this King riding victoriously on horse back into Jerusalem.

What are you waiting to see? Lightening that strikes from heaven? Another miracle that fascinates the world - and drives all the clouds of doubt away? A finger on my hand that grows back? Somebody that turns stones into bread, or jumps from a temple top unharmed?

That is not the essence of God. What defines our God is his glory concealed "in the cross": . **"For God so loved the world that gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him has eternal life"** (John 3:16). The God we worship gave his life for us that we may have forgiveness and be reconciled to the Father. But for this to happen, there had to be "the cross" - the cross that disturbs us. The cross that is so human. A glorious God, yet so helpless in the hands of a sinful people.

But if you rip off the veil there at the cross, that is where the glory of God shines the brightest. Remember what Jesus said to Thomas after his glorious resurrection. He showed him the nail marks in his hands and the cut in his side and said: **"Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe"** (John 20:27).

This story of Jesus' transfiguration was recorded that we remember that the *suffering man* on the cross *is* the *glorious Son of God*. And if your faith enters a desert period, "listen" to him. You may not see his glory now, but he who died and in whose name you were baptised, *is* the glorious Son of God. There are eyewitness of his glory. And one day you will also see him in all of his glory. And then every knee in heaven and on earth will bow before him and every tongue will confess: Jesus "Christ is the Lord!" Amen.

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