

TRANSFIGURATION 14-02-2021. The Reverend Lorna Green
2 Kings 2. 1-12; Psalm 50.1-6; 2 Corinthians 4.3-12; Mark 9.2-9

Today is the beginning of a significant week. It is a turning point in the Church's calendar; we remember the Transfiguration of Jesus, then commemorate Ash Wednesday, and then the season of Lent begins.

Today is known to the world as Valentine's Day, which is really an excuse for retailers to sell cards and flowers. Celebrations for the Chinese New Year began on Friday: kung hei fat choy!

So how are we to understand the strange, other-worldly stories we heard in our Old Testament and Gospel readings today? What sense can we make of fiery chariots, voices from the sky, and glowing figures of dead people? It sounds like science fiction or fantasy, not something real and concrete and understandable in 2021.

The little piece of Paul's letter to the Christians in Corinth that we heard today speaks of the gospel being veiled: in other words, there are people who cannot hear it or receive it, let alone understand it. So my job, as your priest, is 'to equip the saints for the work of ministry'; in other words, to help you make sense of the gospel so you can tell other people in a way that they can hear and understand it.

The story of Elijah, the mightiest of the prophets, is told in the books of the Kings of Israel who followed King David.

The story we heard today is about Elijah passing on the baton to his apprentice, Elisha. Elijah knew he was going- everyone seemed to know he was leaving- but he didn't know how, or whether Elisha was the one to take over. It all depended on God: would God pass the Spirit on to Elisha so he could be a prophet?

In this story it is Elisha who is transfigured and transformed. He followed Elijah, who kept telling him to go away, until he received what he knew he needed for his own ministry.

Elijah is the only prophet who didn't die: he was taken away by God without experiencing death.

The story of the Transfiguration of Jesus is just as mysterious. It is right in the middle of Mark's Gospel, between the baptism of Jesus and his crucifixion and resurrection.

There is nothing unusual about Jesus taking his three closest disciples with him to pray; nothing out of the ordinary about going up the mountain, because mountains are traditionally places to meet with God.

What happened up there was unusual, and for Peter, James and John the experience was terrifying. They saw Jesus- changed, dazzling- talking to Elijah, that prophet who didn't die, and Moses, who talked to God on the mountain and brought the Law and the commandments down to the people.

Then they heard the voice: "This is my Son, the Beloved: listen to him!" In other words- believe what he says. And what Jesus continued to say was that he would be rejected, and suffer, and die; and that the way of the cross is also inescapable for all who would follow him.

The disciples had trouble hearing this. Peter argued with Jesus, and the disciples could not believe that Jesus would really be killed- or that he would rise again. So no wonder God said "LISTEN to him"!

It is never explained why it had to be this way: Jesus did not explain why it was essential to his mission that he should suffer and die. We can see that it was inevitable: Jesus provoked those in power by preaching God's kingdom, and they responded with murderous hatred.

Of course the irony is that this response made it possible for God's non-violent love to triumph, in the resurrection of Jesus.

After the voice had spoken, the disciples saw that Jesus looked normal again and the two figures from the past had gone; and they came back down the mountain, back to everyday life.

After Elisha had watched Elijah being taken up to heaven in a whirlwind, he grieved for him; and then he went about the business of being a prophet.

Whatever we believe about these events, whether we believe they are literally factual, or mythical, or symbolic, we can learn from them because God speaks to us through them, if only we will listen.

We live in time, in the present: the past is unchangeable and the future is not here yet. If time is part of the created order, then God is not bound by time- as we are. We have only today. The mystery of faith is in our relationship with God who is unknowable, beyond time and space- and yet who loves us.

Elisha managed to stay faithful to God; he continued to follow his master, Elijah, in the face of the unknown. Peter, James and John struggled to understand what following Jesus meant, but they persisted, they tried, and they learnt what it means to take up your cross.

So why did Jesus have to die? Not because his suffering in itself could take away evil and sin from the world, but because the powers of evil sought to destroy his witness to non-violent love, justice, and truth. His suffering and death revealed how violent and deadly evil can be; but it also revealed the transforming power of divine love. God's love does not dominate and defeat evil so much as challenge, expose and ultimately transform it.

God tells us to listen to Jesus. Jesus tells us to take up our cross and follow him.

We are called to be active Christians: our lives are not to demonstrate a sort of passive love that tries hard to be good and to avoid 'sinning'. We are to live with a love that refuses to play the games of power, domination, exploitation and greed that try to tempt us away from the way of Jesus.

The Transfiguration story calls us to affirm the truth of God's way and to begin living it with all our hearts and souls- confident that the non-violent way of Jesus is the way of wholeness and eternal life.

During Lent, as we take extra time to focus on the way of the cross, let us ask God to help us find our voices to be witnesses to the transforming power of love.

The Lord be with you.