

CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

Date:	15 February 2026
Service:	Eucharist, Sunday Next Before Lent
Preacher:	The Revd Canon Vanessa Baron, Treasurer

Sunday before Lent Matthew 17:1-9

I wonder how many people here have watched the television programme, 'Who do you think you are?', in which celebrities allow researchers to delve into their family history and bring to light forgotten stories, sometimes scandals but more often stories of courage and resilience in the face of great hardship. So people's forebears appear first as faces in faded black and white photographs, then come to life in remarkable ways. The celebrity will never look at those photographs again in the same way.

It's not exactly the same, but there are parallels with this television programme and what happened to the disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration, when Jesus was transfigured (metamorphosed in Gk) before them. The three disciples walked up the mountain with a very human Jesus, but on the mountain, Matthew tells us that Jesus' face shone like the sun (St Basil - outshining the brightness of the sun) and his clothes became dazzling white. The disciples saw Jesus, quite literally, in a different light, in the words of Archbishop Michael Ramsey – 'as he will be when he returns in glory – in all the glory of God.

We might wonder why the account of the Transfiguration is set for the Sunday before Lent. At first glance it seems a little puzzling – but the Early Church understood the Transfiguration as preparing the disciples for what was going to happen to Jesus in Jerusalem. Leo the Great, preaching in the 5C (Sermon 51), talked about the Transfiguration 'preparing the disciples for the humiliation of Christ's voluntary passion.' Before the agony and the degradation of the Cross, the disciples needed to understand more about the true nature of Jesus

A word though about the context. The Transfiguration is recorded in Matthew 17 and in the previous chapter, Mt 16:16 we have Peter's confession, when in response to Jesus' question, 'Who do people say that I am?' Peter replies 'The Messiah!', followed by Jesus' first passion prediction – when Jesus

tells his disciples that he will go to Jerusalem and there suffer and be put to death, before rising again on the third day. The disciples are bewildered – they cannot comprehend what Jesus is saying – it makes no sense to them and Peter rebukes Jesus. ‘This must never happen to you’.

At one level Peter had understood something about the nature of Christ as the Messiah, the Son of God. But he could not get his head round the idea of this Messiah suffering and being killed - it made no sense at all. Where is the victory? Where the triumph? As for Jesus’ teaching ‘take up your cross and follow me!’ Why should anyone take up an instrument of torture and follow Jesus? It was a horrible, despised and feared method of torture and execution – why would anyone want anything to do with it? The nearest equivalent I can think of is someone convincing us that they are to be a greatest prime minister ever who will lead the country out of the economic doldrums and moral stagnation but then says that first he will need to be captured by the Gestapo, tortured and killed – We would find it incomprehensible!

All the Synoptic Gospels record the Transfiguration as coming immediately after Peter’s Confession. The disciples had not understood Jesus’ words. For them, the mission and ultimate victory of the messiah could never be missed up with anything like the Cross. Part of meaning of the Transfiguration lies in helping them understand Jesus’ glory and majesty, which is veiled on earth.

The First Lesson we need to take away from this passage, the Sunday before Lent, is that the glory of Jesus and the suffering of Jesus are intertwined and not opposed to one another.

The Second thing we can take away is that the glory of not limited to Jesus alone.

The disciples see Moses and Elijah speaking with Jesus – and it is St Luke who tells us that they are also dazzling white. So, while this vision tells us about the nature of Christ, it is not limited to this. Moses of course represents the OT Covenant and the Law (remember Moses was led up another mountain, Sinai, to receive the Law). Elijah represents the prophets who had looked forward to the salvation of Israel. Luke tells us they were speaking about Jesus’ Exodus that would take place in Jerusalem – where Jesus would lead his people out from slavery to freedom; the freedom of the new covenant. But the fact that Moses and Elijah were bathed in light is a reminder that we too are destined for glory – not only to be with God but to be transformed, transfigured and to be made like him.

It confirms that we, who are baptised into Jesus Christ are, by the power of the Spirit participants in Christ/ incorporated with him , not only into his death but also into his resurrection and his glory. Yes, this passage is about the reality of the divinity of Jesus, but also about the hope for each one of us. Again, to quote Leo the Great , 'that the whole body of Christ might realise the character of the change which is ours to receive.'

Finally, as Jesus is revealed in glory on the mountain – so a bright cloud comes down– a symbol known to Israel through their journey in the wilderness – the symbol of the presence of God. IN effect the cloud says 'God is here; God in mystery and darkness of blinding light; God in awe but also God close at hand.' And God's voice declares 'This is my son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased – Listen to him/ harken/ pay attention/ obey.'

What has Jesus just said? In Ch 16, that he will suffer and die and that will be the means by which he will enter into his glory; that is what it takes to be our Saviour. Peter wanted to dismiss this – the voice of God days, 'Listen!' Take heed!

Lent begins on Wednesday – we will go with Jesus into the desert: there will be time to acknowledge and understand our timidity; time to face our fears and hopes, our frailty and needs – our failure, our sin – to prepare for Holy Week and remember the last week of Jesus' life – the pain, the passion, the Cross, in it all we will remember afresh that this is the God -given path to glory. Please note what is happening – put events in your diary – book to spend some time in prayer or reading - want ideas?....

As on the Mountain of Transfiguration Jesus was revealed in Glory - so, on a hill outside Jerusalem, on a cross, we will see Jesus revealed in glory – we will need to hold the two together. On the Mount of Transfiguration the bright cloud surrounded them / at Calvary darkness came down.

At the Transfiguration the voice of God spoke, 'This is my beloved son'- at Calvary a Roman centurion declares with surprise – This is the Son of God.'

Disciples came down from the mountain after the Transfiguration – they were not allowed to linger – they needed to go on to Jerusalem – as we enter Lent we journey with them but in the hope of transformation for each one of us as individuals, for the whole baptised people of God the Church and ultimately for the whole of creation. We are called to be with Christ and to share his glory!