

Sermon for SJB Feb 2021 Mark 9 v2-9

I'm sure you'll all be intrigued by the poster hanging from the lectern. We'll come to that in just a few moments, but first it's important to set this extraordinary happening on the mountain top very briefly in context. It comes after Jesus has asked his disciples that key question: "Who do people say I am?" and the even more crucial question, one we must all answer for ourselves, "and you, who do you say I am?"

Peter has blurted out the truth, "God's Messiah" and Jesus has immediately followed this by trying to tell them about what this will mean: rejection, suffering and death followed by resurrection. But they simply cannot take all that in. Mysteriously he declares, "Truly I tell you there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power."

Then just six days later he takes Peter, James and John, the inner circle if you like, to a mountain top to pray. Right there, these words come true for them. They're given a further insight into just who he is in an awesome, mysterious vision of glory and a direct message from God, "This is my son, my chosen one. Listen to him".

They're absolutely terror struck but mercifully a cloud comes down and when it clears Jesus is alone, looking his usual self, reassuring them. He tells them to keep it to themselves until after he is raised from the dead. Again they are totally perplexed. They don't talk about it with the others. It's all far too much far too soon. Only later, after the resurrection, will they understand much more fully and be able to share it and use it in their preaching and teaching.

Very soon after this Jesus will be leading them resolutely on the way to Jerusalem, knowing full well what risks he's taking. It's these three again, Peter, James and John, who'll later be with him as he suffers the agony of Gethsemane, but only John will be there when once again Jesus is lifted up between two people, not this time between Moses and Elijah but on a cross between two thieves.

These things are all connected aren't they, all part of the whole picture.

If only the vision of glory spared us suffering! But glory can only be seen for what it really is when we see it both containing and surviving disaster. The fact of Jesus's history, part of our history, is a doorway into the endlessness of God's life and resource. This means that everything in our experience is open to God. There's no escape for us from this world, but there's nowhere, no experience, however dark, from which God can be exiled.

I've brought along this poster of a classical Russian icon of the transfiguration, hopefully to help us to enter more fully into its meaning for ourselves. Before we look at it in more detail though, we do need to have a very basic understanding of what icons are about. I'm no expert, far from it, but in recent years I've had the privilege of visiting and worshiping in a variety of Greek orthodox churches where icons play a very important part, and I've read a very helpful little book on the subject by our former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams.

A very simple summary of where icons have come from and what they seek to do goes something like this:

The first Christians were actually regarded as atheists by many other religious peoples. Because they had no sacred images it was assumed that they had no Gods! Images were strictly prohibited because of the Ten Commandments of course but gradually things began to change and develop. By the 6th century there was a rich variety of Christian art, and holy images, or icons, were greatly venerated. Icon is simply the Greek word for image by the way.

Then in the 8th century in the Eastern world there came a violent reaction against these icons. Many were defaced and even destroyed. Those who tried to save them were severely punished. The attackers argued that as God who created all things is himself infinite, to make an image of him is to limit him, to make him into an object and therefore to deny that he is God.

The defenders said, “Ah yes, but God actually took the initiative and limited himself when he came to earth as a human being in Jesus”.

The opponents counterattacked: “But we believe that Jesus is truly human and truly divine at the same time so to make an image of him is therefore to deny that he is God”.

To cut a long story short, the defenders finally won the battle and their reasoning goes something like this:

“In Jesus the divine life shines through and acts on that human nature. When iconographers paint icons of Jesus they’re not trying to show a mere human being but a human being soaked through in the divine life. They approach the task with fasting and prayer and according to strict regulations. Icons are very stylized. Their purpose is to be a gateway to deepening our understanding through the senses and the spirit. The artists offer themselves to God for him to work through their art. The true use of icons is not image worship but rather that in their presence you can become more deeply aware that you are present to God and that God is working on you by his grace.”

This was the argument that finally won the day, and that’s what we need to keep in mind when we use icons as an aid to worship and prayer.

So let’s focus on our icon now.

It’s a classic version in the eastern tradition, which has stayed basically the same for over a thousand years. If you look in Google images you’ll find this one among many.

Christ in pure white robes stands on a rocky outcrop, his feet barely touching the ground. He’s placed against a background of darker colour in concentric circles or other geometric patterns. Moses and Elijah stand on either side and further down the mountain the disciples are sprawled in disarray, looking almost as if they have been thrown down the slope. Peter on one side raises his hand to shield his face from the awesome sight, John in the middle crouches with his hand to his face and James on the other side is often pictured flat on his back or flat on his face. There’s always a tremendous energy about it. In our one here the disciples look as if they’ve been zapped by the three sharp sword-like beams of light coming through Jesus.

The dark background represents the depths of heavenly reality. In the transfiguration the disciples look at Jesus and see him coming out from an immeasurable depth.

Behind or within him infinity opens up. Mark speaks of Jesus as “coming out” to proclaim the good news. (Mk1v38) and John speaks of him “Coming from the depths of the father”. (Jn16v27-30).

Belief in Jesus is seeing him as the gateway to an endless journey into God’s love.

Rowan Williams puts it like this: “Jesus’s life is shot through with God’s. He is carried on the tide of God’s eternal life and borne towards us on that tide, bringing with him all the fulness of the creator. No wonder the disciples are sprawling helplessly. They face a tidal wave! The whole history of God’s dealings with his people is involved in this. Moses and Elijah are also driven towards us by the same energy.

But Jesus alone stands in the very heart of it. It flows through him and from him. It’s the light that comes from him that’s reflected on the robes of his two companions, Moses representing the law and Elijah the prophets. They lived hundreds of years before him, yet what makes them radiant, what makes them agents of God, is the light coming from Jesus, so that this icon, like the story it represents, confuses our ordinary sense of time. In Jesus the world of ordinary time is not destroyed, it’s broken up and reconnected. It works no longer just in straight lines but in layers and spirals of meaning.

When Jesus is transfigured it’s as if there’s a brief glimpse of the end of all things, the world aflame with God’s light.”

“This is the great challenge to faith; knowing that Christ is in the heart of darkness we are called to go there with him. In John 11 Thomas says to the other disciples: “let us go and die with him” and ahead indeed lies death, the dead Lazarus decaying in the tomb, the death of Jesus in abandonment, your death and mine and the deaths of countless human beings in varying kinds of dark night.

But, if we’ve seen his glory on the mountain we know at least, whatever our terrors, that death cannot decide the boundaries of God’s life. With him the door is always open, and no-one can shut it.”

Let’s spend a moment quietly contemplating the icon now and then I’ll conclude with a short prayer.

Carole Lewis

