

February 19th 2023, Eucharist
Matthew 17:1-9 (The Transfiguration)
Mother Alice

'The Christ we share' is the title of a resource used by churches and schools to help people think about images of Jesus – how we ourselves 'see' Jesus, how different cultures and traditions across the world see him, to explore what the historical Jesus would have looked at, and to reflect on the extent to which images and pictures of Jesus shape the way that we think about Jesus, and how they affect the way we pray and worship. It's such a beautiful resource, reminding us that God's church truly is universal – there are images from Churches across Africa, Asia, South America, images so very different from many of the images we see in western Christianity. If I asked you now to close your eyes and picture the Jesus you see when we hear stories from Scripture, when you hear the names of Jesus, or when you pray, I suspect we too would come up with very different pictures.

One of the things I used to enjoy doing when using the resource with teenagers was getting them to compare an image of Jesus which resonated with them, with the image of the reconstruction of the historical Jesus. This image, if you haven't ever come across it, is truly unlike any image of Jesus I have ever seen depicted in art. The Jesus of history, far from being long in the face with something of a gaunt expression and long hair and beard, was actually much more stocky, with dark skin, curly hair, and a much fuller, round face. The children concluded, as I think I do, that it matters little that our own internal images of Jesus look different to the historical Jesus. It matters that we are able to picture a Jesus we can relate to – who looks something like us, speaks something like us, feels truly a brother. And yet I wonder if far too often we seek to limit Jesus – to make him too like us, to read Scripture so that his words feel comfortable and affirming, even claiming that Jesus is 'for us' over against other Christian brothers and sisters in our attitudes and ethics. 'The Christ we share' remains an important resource not just for reflecting on Jesus as an image, but Jesus as a Saviour – the one who as Lord over all can bring unity, peace and justice through His Holy Church across all cultures, languages, traditions, and situations.

The Gospel reading for this morning is the story of the Transfiguration – a story that we find in Matthew, Mark and Luke. It is always set as the reading for the Sunday before Lent – perhaps because it marks a significant shift in the ministry of Jesus and also in the way that his disciples understand him, and to grapple with this story in some way prepares us for the Lenten journey we ourselves are about to begin. I find it helpful to look at this story through the eyes of the disciples, because the story isn't just about the change that happens in Jesus, it is about the change that happens in them. As they go up the mountain, the disciples seem in good spirits. They are happy that they have been chosen to accompany Jesus, they feel connected to him, and clearly recognise the significance of going up to a high place – a place where, like their ancestors in the faith, they anticipate having a spiritual experience. But as Jesus is transfigured in the presence of God, and the figures of Moses and Elijah appear, the disciples behaviour seems to indicate one of confusion or discomfort. Peter's offer to make 3 dwellings I think indicates an anxiety, a lack of control,

a desire to 'do' something because he doesn't really understand what is happening. And then this large cloud appears, and a voice declaring 'This is my Beloved Son, listen to him' – and in my mind I imagine the disciples just completely overwhelmed, as the verse says, on the ground 'overcome with fear'. They had expected to go up the mountain and have some sort of spiritual encounter. They hadn't expected to see their Teacher undergo a physical transformation in the presence of God, encounter their ancestors in the faith, or hear this extraordinary proclamation of his identity. As they went up the mountain, they had a sense of who Jesus was – they could make sense of him but what he said and did. But up the mountain, this image and accompanying understanding was literally blown away, and something yet more extraordinary revealed to them by the power of the Holy Spirit.

My favourite verse in this story is verse 7: 'But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Get up and do not be afraid'. Jesus has been changed in this encounter, but so have the disciples. Their horizons of faith have been widened, their understanding of their Teacher expanded – there is understandably an experience they need to process. But Jesus is with him, tenderly touching them, reassuring them, reminding them of his love. It's the embrace of familiarity after the encounter with change. It's the nurturing encouragement that whispers peace when our nervous systems feel overwhelmed.

Just as the Transfiguration marks a change in Jesus, so it marks a change in the disciples. It reminds us that there is more for us to encounter as we journey in our faith. There are things which will surprise, shock, and overwhelm us. The power of God is probably something we are all hesitant in some ways to experience. There is of course simply the fear of the unknown – we desire a Jesus who we can make sense of, a worship which feels beautiful, a Bible that speaks comfort. But in order for God to help us make sense of ourselves we are invited to go on a journey, this journey of Lent – a journey which opens us up, provides us with space to encounter God in a new way, helps us to remove those limits we set on who Jesus is to us, and so to grow deeper in our knowledge of his love, and in our love for him, and the creation he has made. As we do this, we can be confident that Jesus is with us, that we do not need to be afraid, that there are experiences and encounters on the journey ahead which will change us, and change us in the way that God desires. The Christ we share is one who is like us, and yet unlike us, who loves us, and yet is Love itself. Whatever our knowledge and vision and expectation of Jesus, my prayer as we begin this journey of Lent is that God will open our eyes to see yet a more glorious vision of the One who came to save. May we have the courage to make this journey, to eagerly await the depths of wisdom God seeks to reveal to us, that like the disciples we too can encounter the fullness of the living Christ, here among us, and together celebrate the Christ we share.

Amen