

Mark 9: 2-9 The Transfiguration

Grenoble, February 25th, 2nd in Lent

readings: Genesis 17: 1-17 The covenant of circumcision
 Mark 9: 2-9 The Transfiguration

Preamble

It is good to be with you again. I am not the permanent chaplain. I am a retired vicar from Edinburgh. Before retirement I was from 2000 to 2013 Chaplain in Lyon. It is not our first time here in Grenoble, Susie and I spent some time here in 2019 and 2020. And our much-loved daughter Joanna was part of the congregation here in 1997-98.

We don't reading scripture in a vacuum. Our Christian life is lived at the point where our inherited faith comes into contact with our everyday lives. Where the rubber hits the road. I don't know how your individual weeks have been. Some of you may be tired. And some of you may be in need of some spiritual encouragement.

In the wider world we have on our television sets the distressing images of the situation in Gaza, where Israel's unacceptable bombardment of the civilian population continues. In the UK, the Prime Minister has made worrying noises about pro-Palestinian marches, about the country descending into anarchy and the need for greater police powers. Which is a bit thick given that most of his party can't tell a peaceful pro-Palestinian demonstrator from an Islamic terrorist.

Genesis 17: 1-17 The covenant of circumcision

As you may recall, last week we read of God's covenant with Noah and his descendants; how God promised that he would not again drown the earth; and how the rainbow set in the sky was a reminder to them. That must be reassuring if you are currently experiencing severe floods in western France. This week the OT reading moves on to God's covenant with Abraham, the covenant of circumcision. But I want this morning to concentrate on the gospel reading.

Mark 9: 2-9 The Transfiguration

Today's Gospel is a familiar lectionary passage; the event which we call the *Transfiguration*. Though personally I would probably call it *Jesus takes his friends up a mountain*.

It is a simple story: Jesus takes Peter, and James, and John, away up a high mountain. And there his robes become dazzling white; and he is seen with Elijah and Moses; and the disciples hear a voice from heaven: '*This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him*'. So – what do we think this story is about.

First, glance at the context in Mark's Gospel:

* it comes immediately after Simon Peter's confession of Christ at Caesarea Philippi (Mark 8: 27-30); to which Jesus responds by telling them that the destiny of the Son of Man is rejection, and suffering, and death on a cross; and that, therefore, Jesus' followers should prepare themselves (Mar 8: 31 et seq) for suffering and struggle and self-denial.

* the Transfiguration can be seen as time out; when Jesus takes aside the chosen three, and gives them a vision that will equip them for what lies ahead; for the struggles of Passion Week.

* the need for this becomes clearer when you glance ahead to the immediate sequence to the transfiguration in Mark 9: 14-24: in the absence of Jesus and the inner three, the remainder of the disciples are struggling with a seemingly intractable problem - a boy is in need of healing; the disciples have prayed for him; but he doesn't get any better. [A familiar problem for us ?]

Mark 9: 2-9 **The Transfiguration**

vv. 28-29 As Jesus prays, the disciples with him are given a glimpse of the glory that is to come. As Jesus prays intensely, his whole appearance is transformed: Matthew records: *'his face shines like the sun.'* Here Luke notes: *'his clothes are like a flash of lightning.'* A vision that both echoes Moses' shining face on Mount Sinai [Exodus 34: 29 et seq.]; and which also anticipates that of John on the isle of Patmos [Rev. 1:16].

vv.30-31 Jesus is flanked by two key figures from OT history; the persons of Moses and Elijah. This tells us that Jesus is the fulfilment of Israel's religious traditions; the coming together of the formalism of the Law [Moses] and the freer thread of the prophets [Elijah]. In Jesus the legalistic and the prophetic strands of Israel's religion come together.

NB Important reminder as we look at the fragmented state of the Church of England. Liberals v. Evangelicals; conservative Conservatives v. Charismatics.

vv. 32 Peter and the other disciples are very weary [the exhaustion of a spiritual high]; but they awoke to see God's glory. And Peter blurts out: *"Lord it's really good up here. Let's camp up here. Let's make three booths/shelters; one for you, and one each for Moses and for Elijah."*

vv.34-35 In case the three disciples are unable to take it in, they hear a voice from within the cloud, the voice of God, declaring: *This is my beloved Son, the Messiah/the Christ; listen to him.*

In other words, this mysterious scene on the mountain-top is God's way of reassuring the disciples and equipping them for what lies ahead. From a world in which crowds pursue Jesus and his disciples demanding miracles and healing, time and attention; from this world God removes his people in order to give them a glance of what is to come. It is time out. It is a kind of min-retreat. It anticipates the resurrection appearances.

Mark places the episode right at the heart of his gospel. It comes *after* the first prediction of Jesus' Passion and resurrection in chapter 8, and *before* the second and third predictions in chapters 9 and 10. It points *back* to the very beginning of the gospel, when a voice from heaven speaks at Jesus' baptism, saying *'You are my son, the beloved'*. And it points *forward* to the Passion, where Jesus takes Peter, James and John aside once again, this time to watch with him in Gethsemane. Once again, they struggle to understand, and fall asleep.

The episode has echoes of other Biblical passages:

- * Moses and Elijah, standing on either side of Jesus, represent the Law and the Prophets. The transfiguration reveals the thrust and dynamic of everything that has gone before.
- * The mountain setting and the voice from the cloud [conventionally a sign of theophany] remind us of Moses on Sinai, who entered the cloud where God was.

This vision has a three-fold effect on the disciples: it is about

- * **Reassurance:** that in spite of their doubts and their tiredness, this Lord is the Messiah. Long promised. And long awaited by his people.

* **Reconciliation:** reconciliation between material and spiritual worlds; reconciliation between our past lives and our live that is to come; reconciliation between the living and the dead.

* **Recommissioning:** this is the vision that enables us to step back with confidence into this earthly life. As for the disciples, so too for us. Pray that, as the congregation here looks forward to a new phase of church life, and eventually a new chaplain we too may be reassured, reconciled, and recommissioned for our life in the days ahead.

Chris Martin,
February 2024