

My first proper job involved the maintenance of high powered, high frequency radio transmitters for the Dept of Aviation. You could see that some of the older equipment was powerful, and potentially dangerous, just by looking at the huge, fan cooled monsters that they were. But we also had a new transmitter, very state of the art, very powerful, potentially dangerous to work on, but quite innocuous to look at. Someone devised a demo to show trainees just how powerful this piece of kit was. Keeping the newbies at a safe distance we would carefully disarm the safety switches and open the side panel – which you had to do to work on it – and then we'd pick up an ordinary fluorescent tube and walk towards the equipment. The power of this piece of gear was such that when you got within a metre or so of it, the fluoro would light up. It was a tangible demonstration of the otherwise unseen power of this seemingly innocuous piece of equipment – and it usually had the desired impact!

The transfiguration of Jesus is a little bit like that – it's a demonstration of the otherwise somewhat hidden power and status and authority of Jesus – except it would have been immensely more powerful and would have had immensely more impact than a fluoro tube lighting up!

Modern readers of the Bible, tend to have two key problems with the Transfiguration. The first of these has to do with whether we can accept the Transfiguration as an historical event. The second, if it did happen as portrayed in the Gospels, is what does it signify, what meaning are we supposed to take from it.

When it comes to the historicity of the Transfiguration, the Gospel witness is unambiguous. In the three Gospels which give an extended account, it's clearly set out as an historical event. Matthew, Mark and Luke, and all tie their accounts to a particular time in the ministry of Jesus, and to a particular geographical location. Mark's account has an eye-witness touch to it, in that it provides a sympathetic reason for Peter's outburst. Mark tells us that Peter 'wasn't sure what to say' – a comment which makes sense if, as many scholars think, Peter was the main source for Mark's Gospel. And of course, it's quite in character for Peter to say something, even when

he's not sure what to say! In contrast, Luke shows less personal insight, commenting merely that Peter 'didn't know what he was saying'; and Matthew makes no comment at all. In addition to the evidence from the Gospel accounts, in his second letter Peter makes a clear reference to the Transfiguration as a personal and historical experience. There he writes:

*<sup>16</sup> For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. <sup>17</sup> For he received honour and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, 'This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.' <sup>18</sup> We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain. <sup>19</sup> So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed.*

When it comes to understanding the meaning of the Transfiguration, it's essential that we look at it in the light of its placement in the Gospel story and its Old Testament background.

In all three gospel accounts the Transfiguration is placed late in the ministry of Jesus as he prepares his disciples for his final journey to Jerusalem. There, he tells them, he will first be welcomed, and then rejected by the elders and the chief priests, and finally be put to death on a cross. He tells them also that, on the third day he will rise again, but there's no indication that they understood what he meant. To say the least, the disciples find all this hard to take. Speaking for all of them Peter had just recently declared Jesus to be the Messiah – the Son of the living God - and had been affirmed by Jesus for this insight. It's inconceivable for the disciples that the Messiah should suffer and die, and so Peter, as the leader of the group, had taken Jesus aside and begun to rebuke him. Peter is apparently immune to the irony involved in telling Jesus that he's got it all wrong. Six days later, Jesus takes Peter, James and John to a high mountain, and there the Transfiguration takes place.

St Mark's account emphasises that the Transfiguration was for the benefit of the disciples.

Mark tells us that Jesus was transfigured 'before them', Moses and Elijah appeared 'before

them, the cloud that appeared 'enveloped them' and a voice comes 'to them' from the cloud. The Transfiguration was for them – for the disciples, and it's for all disciples, then and now.

Everything about the Transfiguration served to impress on the disciples the sheer greatness of Jesus. We tend to miss the clues because we're not as well versed in Old Testament history as the first disciples, but for Peter and James and John the historical precedents, coupled with what they saw and heard, would have made for an overpowering experience.

The mountain on which the transfiguration took place is not named in any of the Gospels. An ancient tradition identifies it as Mt Tabor. But it's not named, I suspect, because the particular mountain doesn't matter. What matters is the parallel with another mountain – Mt Sinai. In the Exodus story Moses ascends Mt Sinai where he is endorsed by God to be the one who would lead Israel and shape its life to the blessing of the people, and to the glory of God. At Sinai, Exodus 24 tells us, ' . . . the glory of the Lord settled on the mountain and cloud covered it . . . and the Lord called to Moses out of the cloud.' All of this would have been recalled instantly by the disciples at the Transfiguration - but at the Transfiguration it is Jesus who receives God's endorsement. He stands with Moses and Elijah – but note, only Jesus is transfigured – only Jesus shines with the intense radiance of God's glory.

Moses and Elijah are key figures in the faith of Israel. Moses was the mediator of the covenant at Sinai, the prophet (Dt. 18:15; 34:10) through whom Israel was brought into that covenant relationship and made the people of God. Elijah was the prophet through whom, at a time of crisis, the people were turned back to the covenant and Israel's special status was saved. The great Old Testament historian H.H. Rowley commented:

'Without Moses the faith of Israel . . . would never have been born. Without Elijah it would have died.'

The presence of Moses and Elijah signifies for the disciples the continuity of the ministry and mission of Jesus with the faith of Israel – as Jesus put it, he 'came not to abolish the law and the

prophets, but to fulfil them.' At the same time, the transfiguration of Jesus marks him as incomparably greater than even Moses and Elijah.

Understandably Peter, James and John are awestruck by all this. But more was to come! As Peter starts to speak, the disciples are enveloped by a cloud – signifying the immediate presence of God and a voice comes from the cloud, 'This is my beloved son, listen to him!'

Those words sum up the point of the whole thing! What the disciples have to grasp, and what we have to grasp, is that Jesus is not just another human leader, like Moses or Elijah, who while great had their blind spots, nor is he just another teacher, with whom they are free to debate about this or that. The experience of the Transfiguration, and the presence and words of God make it clear that Jesus, who they know to be truly human, is at the same time, God's beloved Son and for that reason they are to 'Listen to him.'

These final words, "listen to him,' are, I think, the real kicker! Peter has not long since pronounced Jesus to be God's messiah, the Son of God – an insight which Jesus declares to be God given – but then, in an apparent contradiction Peter argues with Jesus about the suffering Jesus has said he must undergo. As Peter looked back I think these words would have come to him as a stinging rebuke.

We should be careful though, of thinking this rebuke applies only to Peter, or of thinking of Peter as the only one who would be so stupidly contradictory, because it strikes me that we also declare Jesus to be Lord and Saviour and then, when it suits us, readily ignore what he has to say to us, especially the difficult bits. We, like Peter and the other disciples, need to have the status and authority of Jesus underlined for us if we are truly to follow him in a hostile world. And that's the purpose of the Transfiguration - the purpose of the Transfiguration is to stamp the glory and authority of Jesus on the key leaders among his followers and thus to impress on them (and us) the need to 'Listen to him!' 'Listen' doesn't just mean 'hear' it means 'hear and obey' – and if we're to do that we need, as that lovely Anglican collect has it, to 'Read, mark,

learn and inwardly digest' God's word written which we have in the scriptures. That's why Jo and I are so keen to foster Bible study and discussion groups here at St Luke's.

Finally, and very briefly, people often ask why, in v 9, Jesus instructs Peter, James and John not to tell his other followers about their experience until after he had risen from the dead? Well we're not told why, but I suspect it's because Jesus wants the key leaders of the disciples to be absolutely clear about who he is, but he doesn't others to believe in him because of the power and glory of the Transfiguration. Rather he wants them first to know and come to trust in him on account of the love and suffering he demonstrates at the cross. Perhaps that might be instructive for us too, and the church as a whole as, we seek to share with others the good news of Jesus. It's not first and foremost about power and glory but about his love and suffering for us.

*Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; grant us that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them; that by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our savior Jesus Christ.*