

The Transfiguration – Sunday 23 February 2020 (Rev. Wendy Sellers) ***(Exodus 24. 12-end; Matthew 17. 1-9)***

The human face is incredibly expressive. It can show how we are feeling, even what we are thinking. One of the more unusual manifestations is when the face actually changes colour.

So, I still vividly remember the day that one of my pupils literally turned green during a practice for our class assembly. Two seconds later, she fainted. We have all seen toddlers turn bright red with rage. We have all seen someone turn pale with fear or pain.

I have no idea how these changes happen but I'm certain there's a scientific explanation. I am less sure there's a precise reason why people's faces glow or even light up, but we've all seen that, too.

Years ago, one morning, seven-year-old Sienna bounced into my classroom. Her face was incandescent with joy. That morning she had got up and gone down to the kitchen to find her grandpa sat at the kitchen table eating his breakfast. He had flown in for a surprise visit from Australia. I still get a lump in my throat when I remember her face.

And it is something we have all seen – not frequently, perhaps – but often enough to know it happens. The glow on the face of an adult holding a precious new-born baby. Think of the faces of proud parents at a graduation ceremony. The shining faces of a couple on their wedding day.

Last year I married two couples and it was just incredible to see their faces as they were married. I am truly grateful to Alan for being generous enough to share this privilege with me. If I was him, I'd keep all the weddings to myself.

Now, some of you came to support me last June when I was ordained. So, you will have seen the faces of some of those priested light up, perhaps mine did, too. I'll certainly never forget the first time I went to an ordination, for my friend Jenny's deaconing. She shone so brightly that she could have lit up the Abbey on her own and she actually went about like that for weeks. It was a bit weird. It was the first time I understood why holy people in paintings have halos around them. It is their faith which transfigures them into something more than they are.

In today's readings we have two examples of transfiguration – both happening symbolically on top of a mountain. In the first, we have Moses going up Mount Sinai in order for God to give him the Ten Commandments, as well as an awful lot of instructions about temples and worship and what the priests should wear. It goes on for chapters. By the time Moses gets back down the mountain, the Israelites have got bored and made a golden calf to worship. Moses' happy time on the mountaintop spent in God's company did not, unfortunately, last.

Yet we are told that this encounter with the Lord resulted in a permanent transfiguration of Moses' face. In Exodus 34 we are told his face was 'radiant', and that this made the people fear him. From then on he wore a veil, uncovering his face only when he entered the presence of the Lord. After the meeting on Mount Sinai, Moses was forever changed, yet it seems he was also still himself.

Then in the Gospel reading we have Jesus taking Peter, James and John up a mountain where the true glory of Jesus is revealed to them. He is transfigured – like Moses, he is still himself and yet changed into something far beyond what was ordinarily visible to them.

As if that were not exciting enough, they are then joined by Moses and Elijah – those superstar long-ago prophets. And if that were not exciting enough – they then hear the actual voice of God. It is not at all surprising that the disciples

want to preserve this perfect place and moment and stay on the mountaintop for ever. But like Moses, they had to come down and re-join the world.

Now these two quite strange passages from the Bible may not seem to have much relevance for us today, but if we thought that we'd be wrong. In fact, I've thought of several linked messages we might like to take away.

The first is that we all recognise those special moments when people's faces light up. So, we need to treasure them. We need to hold them in our hearts to get us through the times when the world feels dull or even dark. They are moments of joy - moments that feel perfect. I would say they are God-given. We need to re-live them when we can. I'm betting that Moses and the disciples were sustained by that time on the mountain. So, let's all look out for transfiguring moments. They may well happen in church because we tend to be more open to God when we are worshipping. But, chances are, we aren't looking at each other. When we do catch a glimpse of a face lit up from within, what we are seeing is the Christ-light, transfiguring our ordinary faces into something shining and beautiful and slightly otherworldly. Let's treasure those moments.

Secondly, we need to find our own personal mountaintops. Our places of transfiguration. Some people go on retreat, some go on a quiet day – we have one coming up on 21 March. I know some of you find your mountaintop at one of our more alternative services – the Breathe prayer meeting, Soul Space or Meditation and Mindfulness. You might think this isn't for you – but you'll never know if you don't try.

Years ago, I volunteered to help cater at choir week – while the main church choir sang the services at Ripon Cathedral. I discovered, to my surprise, that 1662 BCP choral Evensong is one of my mountaintops. There, I encounter God in words, music and stillness- it's never failed me yet.

Some of us literally climb hills or mountains and find that perfect moment in the view from the top. Some of us will find it drinking a cup of tea while watching the sunrise. We are all different and finding your mountaintop may happen accidentally, so we need to stay open. When we find our mountaintop, we need to try to visit it regularly.

Thirdly, I believe this Gospel reading is one of the few passages in the New Testament, if we ignore the Book of Revelation, which gives us a hint of what Heaven might be like for you and me. You see, I've always been a bit concerned that Heaven might be some kind of soul soup – where all the souls of the departed are merged into one and spend their entire times jointly enacting scenes from Revelation. And I don't find that reassuring or even appealing.

Yet here we have Moses and Elijah who are long dead. It is unlikely the disciples have seen pictures of what they look like. Yet when they meet them, they know exactly who they are. And they are really keen to hang out with them and chat. Preferably forever. And that suggests that when we get to Heaven, we will still be recognisably ourselves as individuals. We will be gloriously changed – transfigured – but we will still be us. And, of course, after the Resurrection Jesus, too, is gloriously changed yet still himself. And that makes me feel a lot better about eternal life.

Then, lastly, we have to accept that we can't stay on the mountaintop. The glow of new parenthood will turn to the exhaustion of sleepless nights and colic. The glow of the wedding day will turn into the everyday life of deciding whose turn it is to put the bins out. That is the reality of life. We live mostly in the valleys, with all the mess and muddle of our lives.

But the mountaintop is always there. Jesus mostly hid it, yet the Christ-light was shining bright within him. And it's in us, too. It is a light that we sometimes glimpse in others in moments of perfect joy. A light so bright its mere memory can warm the cold times.

And a light, I believe, we will enjoy forever in our eternal lives to come.