

Second Sunday of Lent

28.02.2021
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Introduction

Our readings for the second Sunday in Lent bring us to the Transfiguration. In this text we see the inner life of Jesus communicated for his friends to see. He is with Moses and Elijah, symbols of the Law and the Prophets. Peter, one of the friends, wishes this moment to go on forever.

Amidst the many Christological possibilities for discussion, what intrigues me most is that Peter demonstrates how – in certain moments of elevation – we wish for an experience to last.

But – I know you know this from your own life too – it doesn't.

And we are brought into the conflict of living with moments of insight alongside the everyday humdrum of our lives and responsibilities.

Even now, as we prepare to reflect on the text, it may be worthwhile to remember a fleeting moment of sheer delight. Of course, it did not last forever, but the experience of it, for however long it lasted, was a gift nonetheless, a gift that is providing nurture far beyond its original duration.

Text

Friends, there are two options for gospel readings for this week. While our reflection for this week is for the account of the Transfiguration from the gospel of Mark (Mark 9:2–9), there is also the option of Mark 8:31–38. While we haven't provided a reflection for the Mark 8 text we have put the gospel text below, should you find it of benefit for your own consideration.

Mark 9:2–9

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

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Mark 8:31–38

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

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## Comment

As a broad breakdown of the structure of the gospel of Mark, one can highlight

.1: a prologue (1:1–13),

..2: followed by the Galilean ministry (1:14–8:30),

....3: leading to the journey to Jerusalem (8:31–10:52)

..4: the events of Jerusalem, including the last supper, and crucifixion (11:1–15:47)

.5: finishing with the details of the tomb (16:1–8, 9–20).

The first and fifth section (prologue & tomb) echo each other in certain themes of isolation. The second and fourth sections — the Galilean ministry and the events in Jerusalem — also echo each other also in terms of considerations about the disciples (section 2 introduces the possibility of the disciples being followers of Jesus; section 4 all but dismisses them — Mark’s gospel does not have a high theology of those disciples).

Section 3 — the central section — is an extraordinary one, and one in which imaginations about the *perception of Who Jesus Is* come to the fore. There are stories (problematic because of their uncritical usage of disability as metaphor) about blind people coming to see, whether gradually or immediately, and there are harsh

statements from Jesus about what it means to follow him; additionally there is the story of the disciples failing to heal an afflicted boy; and it is also in this section where we find the story of the transfiguration.

This brief outline of the structure of the story within which Mark's account of the transfiguration occurs is helpful because it demonstrates the importance of this revelation of Jesus' identity in this most particularly secretive of gospels. As we've explored in the previous weeks, the gospel of Mark, and especially these texts for Lent, consider the relationship of the private life to the public life. The public life is negotiated not only by the individual person — Jesus can decide how he wishes to be in his public statements — but also by the weight of expectation, demand, political and religious burdens are put on someone in their public witness.

While we are thinking of this in terms of the life of Jesus of Nazareth, we can also extend this to the experience of many people with a public role today: clergy, therapists, chaplains, medics, social workers, teachers. When the identity of your vocation or role or work is known, you can sometimes be perceived as public property, where your expertise can be called upon, and where you can be blamed for things even while you are trying to go about your normal business. This tension of how to live your life in public, and how to live with the public perception of your public life, is something that some people with particular roles or calls in society face on a daily basis. This is not limited to the roles mentioned above, there are far more, and also, even deeper than roles, sometimes *identities* like that of parent, or designated carer within a family can bring with them the complexity of coping with others expectation of your performance of your role.

This is all the more exacerbated during Covid.

In the exhaustion of roles, we can look for relief, and perhaps hope that the moments of relief can be sufficient.

The event of the transfiguration itself is well known to many: on the top of the mountain, Jesus is transfigured and Elijah and Moses appear; Moses as an embodiment of the Law, and Elijah as an embodiment of all the Prophets. Jesus is being revealed in light of word and insight. Was this a moment where the gospel writers were portraying Jesus as being in need of support, or recalibration, or reminding? It is near the point where Jesus reaches Jerusalem where – even the dogs know – he will face the brutality of empire.

However, Peter interprets the event differently. He is witnessing what he's witnessing and he wishes to remain there.

Peter's outburst is easy to caricature. But in many ways we can find sympathy with Peter. He is enjoying an experience that is elevated from the humdrum of misperception, of vague wondering – he is being given a glimpse into certitude, and he does not wish this certitude to be only momentary. He wishes to stay, or, he wishes the moment would stretch on forever. “Let us make three dwellings.” He isn't interested in a dwelling for himself or the other disciples, he seems happy for all of them to rough it. He does want to find a way to capture the experience, contain it, perhaps even chain it.

And this is the way with so many of us on the path towards flourishing, whether flourishing in ourselves, our relationships, our work, or our spirituality. We have momentary glimpses into something of great beatitude and we wish it could always be like this. Then we go down the mountain, and our glimpse seems fragmentary, and the aftermath can make us wonder if the elevated experience was hollow because of its limitation in time.

This can bring an experience of conflict within ourselves, and can cause dis-ease in us. While that discomfort is understandable, it may be possible to take some comfort from it: that life is built on moments of perception mixed alongside

moments of misperception; that we can find comfort in the strong memory of elevated moments of prayer, or synchronicity, or creativity, or collaboration, or harmony with loved ones... and then there's the accompanying everydayness of the times when things just plod along. These two ways of being human are not in conflict with each other, rather they are part of the experience of an ordinary life.

The wisdom of this text is that a gift of an experience was needed, and that Peter's desire for permanence is not met. The moment passes. Jesus and his friends are brought back to the here-and-now, they move to travel down the mountain where challenges await. There are complexities, things that are difficult to understand, questions to ask, things to learn unfolding in front of them. The work of a day. And hopefully, some rest eventually.

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## Prayer

Transfigured Jesus

you trusted your friends to see a glimpse of who you knew yourself to be  
and this glimpse was momentary.

We see glimpses of who we can be, of who our communities can be,  
of what our art could be, of what our loves could be.  
And then we blink and the glimpses seem gone.

Help us be nurtured by these fragmentary perceptions  
of possibility. Help us take courage  
from tiny reminders of what love can look like.

Especially when we're tired, or feeling far  
from such experiences.

Because you had moments of beatitude  
that were good enough to carry you through  
weeks of trundling toward Jerusalem  
toward a clash with powers that sought to undo you.

Amen.

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## Further Reading

Friends, the Iona Community are inviting people to join them virtually during Easter Events throughout Holy Week. [You can find out more by clicking here.](#)

And Corrymeela is hosting [Theology in Conversation](#) events on Sunday nights at [5.30pm](#) (GMT) during Lent, as well as broadcasting a podcast "The Corrymeela Podcast" which can be found on podcast apps or [listened to online here.](#)

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