

Sermon preached by David Cruise at Hinde Street Methodist Church,

Sunday before Lent 2015.

Readings: 1 Kings 19: 9-16 and Mark 9: 2-9

I trust we are all ready for Pancake Day – this coming Tuesday. The day when we traditionally eat up all those rich leftovers before we enter the disciplined time of Lent. But where do those rich leftovers come from?

In fact the tradition of the Church is that the Sunday before Pancake Day is declared a feast day. But as well as feasting on good food, every year on this day the gospel account of the event we know as the Transfiguration is read. This is because it is recognised that in looking at the Transfiguration we indeed share in a spiritual feast and indeed see life in a different dimension. So, on this Sunday before Lent may I, if you will excuse the phrase, invite us all to tuck in to a feast.

Now traditionally a feast has three courses – a starter – a main course – and a sweet. So let's take this as a guide for our spiritual feast.

So we start with the Starter in our spiritual feast. The Starter – the appetiser – that which will stimulate our spiritual taste buds – excite our deeper appetites.

Now fittingly – for a spiritual feast – the account of the Transfiguration starts with an invitation. Jesus invites three of his disciples – Peter, James and John to leave the flat ground and climb a mountain with him.

They climb together – they reach the summit – they stand there – then something happens.

A change came over Jesus – Matthew, trying to put it into words says - Jesus was bathed in light and his face shone like the sun.

But could it be that it was not Jesus who changed – rather it was the three disciples who changed – in that it was as if a veil had been lifted from their eyes.

In 1968 the BBC launched 'A hymn for Britain' competition. The winning hymn was in fact based on the Transfiguration and the first verse is this:

'Once on a mountain top there stood three startled men. They watched the wheels of nature stop and heaven break in. Their friend of everyday – the face they knew as his, they saw for one half hour - the way he always is'.

Not great poetry but surely a truth.

Looking at Jesus and seeing the physical man – but also seeing through Jesus to everything he stands for.

For as St Paul says 'The God of creation – the God who said "Out of darkness the light shall shine!" is the same God who made his light shine in our hearts – to bring us the knowledge of God's glory shining in the face of Jesus Christ'.

Looking beyond – having the veil lifted – having our spiritual eye opened.

We read our Bibles - yes – we read the stories of Jesus – for instance Jesus healing – we are impressed – but do we look beyond and glimpse a deeper truth behind those healings?

Yes the Gospel writers glory in the miracles of Jesus but they are not seen as ends in themselves. Rather they are seen as signs that point beyond themselves to the ultimate purposes of God.

They are seen as breakthroughs of the spiritual into the physical and they reveal God's eternal purposes of wholeness and healing although at present we live in an imperfect world.

And of course the ultimate miracle is the resurrection. Again the physical resurrection appearances of Jesus are not seen as ends in themselves but they open up a new dimension of life beyond the physical – with the physical being taken up into the wider spiritual dimension. Indeed they point to the eternal.

That wonderful verse of the hymn by George Herbert which says so much:

'A man who looks on glass, in it may stay his eye – but, if he wishes, through it pass and then the heavens espy.'

And this is not just true of the life of Jesus. Great art, music, philosophy, mathematics, consciousness and above all love and relationships are they just ends in themselves – just products of the material world – or do they reflect an eternal dimension, so all is taken up into the heart of God?

Having the veil lifted – seeing in Jesus the mystery of the eternal God.

Surely enough of a starter – an appetizer in our spiritual feast.

But now to the main course and here is something really to get our teeth into

First it was not just the three disciples and Jesus on that mountain. But there also appeared Elijah and Moses.

Now clearly this was a mystical experience but let us not discount it.

To return to that hymn in the BBC competition – it finishes with these words:

"O Lord of hidden light – forgive us who despise the things which lie beyond our sight and give us eyes"

We know little of what happened on that mountain top – it's beyond our understanding – but one thing is certain – and that is what happened was not so much a lifting things up to heaven – it was about bringing things down to earth.

For we know something about Elijah and Moses – they were both 'down to earth' figures and they knew all about living in the real world and yes, following God's way in the world.

Elijah – well he started off being one of the ecstatic - all singing, all dancing prophets like the whirling dervishes. But after 'signs and wonders' and outward victory on Mount Carmel calling down fire from heaven – he finds himself running for his life as the Queen Jezebel turns on him.

Then on Mount Sinai –alone and frightened – he experiences God – not in outward signs of earthquake wind and fire but the still inner voice which sent him packing down the mountain to be involved in the politics of the day and to anoint two new kings which certainly stirred things up! There was no running away from the world for Elijah.

Then Moses – called by God to lead his people out of slavery in Egypt and leading and controlling a people for 40 years in the wilderness with all the challenges and frustration involved.

For instance, coming down the mountain with the tablets of stone on which were written the God given 10 commandments and finding the people half naked dancing round a golden calf and in his frustration he drops the tablets of stone and they go crashing down the mountain.

Real life stuff is ever there was.

Yes – the reality of the cost of trying to express the will and ways of God in the real imperfect world.

And this is not all. St Luke tells us in his account of the Transfiguration that Elijah and Moses were talking with Jesus about what was to face him in Jerusalem. And we know what that was. Jesus faced the toxic mix of religion and politics plus vested interests which led him to be crucified as a criminal.

Yes, it's one thing to be on top of a mountain breathing the rarefied spiritual air. It is another thing to come down the mountain of Transfiguration and seek to transfigure this world – to overcome evil – to bring in justice and mercy and forgiveness.

To express the ways of God in our everyday lives and – yes – seek the transfiguration of the world.

This is the task to which God called Elijah and Moses. This is the task for which Jesus gave his life. And this is the task to which you and I are called – yes – this is the main course!

But now to the third course of our spiritual feast – the sweet. The dictionary gives the definition of ‘sweet’ as ‘having a pleasant taste’ So the sweet is something that ‘leaves a good taste in our mouth as we go our way’

How did the disciples react to their experiences on the mountain? At first they were overawed – then it all became too much and they were terrified.

Not surprising for we read “a shining cloud enveloped them”. The ‘Shekinah - that wonderful Hebrew word for the glory of God.

Being caught up in the very glory of God. That’s enough to terrify anyone.

And then the voice from within the cloud “This is my beloved Son in whom I delight – listen to him.”

At this the disciples threw themselves on the ground and covered their heads and they remained there until Jesus touched them and lifted them onto their feet.

Then we read ‘the disciples looked around them **BUT** ‘only Jesus was there!’ ‘**ONLY** Jesus was there’

The disciples went down the mountain but Jesus **went with them.**

The third course of the feast. We go down the mountain, back into the world but we do not go alone. For Jesus goes with us. And he will always be with us even to the end of the world. Amen.