

Hinde Street Methodist Church

Sunday 23rd February 2020 11.00am

Rob Thompson

Transfiguration: Encountering God and the Value of Listening to Our Neighbours

Exodus 24:12-18

Matthew 17:1-9

I wonder how many sermons we have heard which begin with a story about climbing a mountain? I suspect a few! For the preacher, the mountaintop is a glorious metaphor but reading these passages from Scripture this week I wondered if perhaps sometimes it is not only the ascent of the mountain which captures our imaginations but the climb back down the mountain which also ascribes some significant measure of meaning.

The descent is often as difficult as, if not even more difficult than, the ascent. Those of us who have been to Israel on pilgrimage and visited Mount Tabor, the traditional site of the Transfiguration, will know this to be true. Because at Mount Tabor pilgrims are expected to leave their pilgrim buses at the bottom and to climb the mountain in small minibus taxis. The ascent is one thing but coming back down, spinning round hairpin bends in such tiny taxis is really rather frightening!

In our Gospel reading this morning it is true that something really rather spectacular occurs on top of that mountain. But it is in the descent that Jesus chooses to speak of the experience to his disciples.

‘As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."’

Jesus asks the disciples not to say anything about the experience. So even afterwards, the event which we call the Transfiguration is still full of mystery. And what about our story from the Hebrew Scriptures? We heard that ‘Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.’ So what do the Scriptures not tell us of the conversations between Moses and God up there on the mountaintop for 40 days?

We like to have answers for everything. There must be some explanation for every event and meaning in every utterance. But can we really explain the Transfiguration? Can we state for sure what transpired between God and Moses? Can we sum up thousands of years of faith and doubt and struggle and creativity and yearning and journeying and hope; can we really summarise all that in a sentence or two or even a 15 minute sermon? I don't think we can. At least I certainly won't attempt to this morning.

Our Bibles are full of mystery and our readings this morning are no different. And that's just as well, because life is full of mystery too. What is going to happen next? What is my neighbour's experience really like? Is this all that it's meant to be? We cannot explain everything or always know how things are going to turn out. It was ever thus and it was such

for the people of Israel journeying with Moses towards a land promised but not yet seen and it was the same for those three disciples on Mount Tabor. What did they witness up there on the mountainside, and what did it all mean for them, for Jesus, and for all our futures?

Well, in order to try and answer those questions, let us again return to what Jesus says at the end of our Gospel passage. Jesus suggests to the disciples how they might—if not answer the questions or explain the event—at least begin to *respond* to the experience. And Jesus' conclusion is perhaps surprising. After all, the mountaintop is the traditional site for an encounter between God and His human intercessors: it was on the mountaintop that Moses was given the tablets of the Law by God and it was from the mountaintop that Moses glimpsed the Promised Land. These are foundational moments. But Jesus surprises us because after their transformative experience on a mountaintop, after that great event which we look on now as a key moment in understanding the nature of Jesus' ministry, Jesus asks the disciples to keep whatever transpired to themselves for the time being: "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

When we hear a good story or experience something which is difficult to understand, we want to rush to tell everyone we know. Today we often choose to share it on social media and follow how much interaction we receive as a result. But in this rush to share I wonder if we lose something about the importance of truly listening and reflecting. With all the mysteries and the challenges of our lives, sometimes we will find greater meaning if we allow ourselves not to rush to give an assured answer but to respond in time by truly listening. This is, after all, what God commands the disciples at the moment of Transfiguration: 'While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"'

In listening we might find a way to respond to that which is mysterious or challenging to us today.

We live in deeply challenging times, that much we know. And I wonder how much of all that we struggle to understand and all that disturbs us to our core, how much all of this calls for the listening and the internal reflection which Jesus asks of his disciples following the Transfiguration.

That doesn't sound particularly radical, does it? There doesn't seem much call to pound my fists on the pulpit whilst preaching listening and internal reflection. And with the challenges we face perhaps this is not enough?

Just one example but a significant one: the climate is at breaking point. Things have to be done now to save our planet from self-made destruction. What good is listening and internal reflection when the stakes are so high?

And I find this sense of frustration and helplessness in my own job too, working for a Jewish-Christian relations charity. In January we marked Holocaust Memorial Day, the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, when the world declared that they would remember the 6 million victims of hatred against Jews. Barely 10 days later the Community Security Trust (the organisation which monitors antisemitism in this country) released their

annual summary report on 2019 which showed the fourth consecutive annual increase in recorded antisemitic incidents in the UK. The fourth consecutive year in which antisemitic incidents were recorded at the highest levels they have ever been recorded here in our communities, and I say 'our communities' because most of those incidents were recorded here in London.

What good is time spent listening and reflecting when sometimes there is nothing left to do but to speak out? Silence has so often been an excuse for indifference to suffering. But it is equally true that there is something radical about listening and internal reflection as an approach to the challenges we face. Because listening is founded on an understanding which is so startlingly different to the consensus which governs the chaos which we call public debate today.

It is the understanding that, whether on a mountaintop or on the journey back down, each encounter with another person, familiar or other, matters.

It is the understanding that each human being we engage with, whether a friend or a stranger whom we can never fully appreciate, that in each one without exception can be discerned a glimmer of the divine presence which gives meaning to our lives.

It is the understanding that nothing can be achieved in our lives by going alone, that only by listening to those who journey with us can we really fashion a community which is moulded by the values of love and hope.

The Catholic theologian Henri Nouwen once said that listening is much more than allowing another to speak whilst waiting for the chance to respond. Listening is much more than allowing another to speak whilst waiting for the chance to respond.

Listening is a radical act. Being attentive to the world around us is a powerful force for change. Recognising those whom we encounter and the insights they can offer as gifts of God: that is a call of discipleship.

So when God commanded Peter, James, and John to 'listen' to Jesus and when Jesus ordered them not to tell anyone of their experience of the mountain, the disciples were being called to lay aside themselves, to open up to the experience, to enter into communion with God and with each other, and to learn anew from their encounter with the mystery of the Divine.

Listening is a radical act. As we contend with a public debate which is polarised and divisive, when we encounter those who are different from us and who have stories to tell, and if we sometimes simply do not know what to do with an experience which surprises or unsettles us, we can take time to listen. Listening opens us up to learn new things, hear experiences and stories different to our own, encounter what something feels like from the "other side". I mentioned earlier my frustration at a society which claims to remember the past and which seems to fail to do anything to stop the steady normalisation of hate speech and indifference. It is true that we must—as a Church and as individuals—speak out on these issues and indeed many more. But I think we can also begin by listening: listening to others tell their story, listening to the words we ourselves choose to contribute, and enabling space where diversity of perspective and experience can be heard.

Listening is a radical act because, above all, listening encourages us to learn of God, of our neighbour, and of our own part to play.

Listening is perhaps therefore an appropriate starting point for the journey of Lent which we begin on Wednesday. This Lent, why not at the end of every day, make a short list (maybe it will be one or perhaps two things per day). Note down, just for yourself, the things which you listened to that day: the things you learned from somebody else, the things for which you can give thanks.

And then, in not rushing to judge or conclude or even necessarily to share right away, we might find something new about God which might just get us through the next stage of our journey and which might enable us to meet our neighbours with grace and our community's needs with the radical love which we know of through God.

So we began with mystery. We were called to listen and to take note without necessarily rushing to share everything of the experience. And in this care for both known and unknown, we have touched the divine and glimpsed something of God.

And we began on the mountainside and found that there is as much to learn in the descent as there is in the ascent. So I'd like to end with the mountain metaphor again because I'm a preacher and as we have found a preacher can't resist a mountain metaphor.

In May 1916 Ernest Shackleton and his fellow explorers Frank Worsley and Tom Crean arrived in Stromness, a whaling station on South Georgia. They had been trekking for 36 hours in life-threatening conditions in order to save the rest of their party who were stranded on Elephant Island. The walk had involved climbing and descending a 5,000ft mountain range with nothing but a rope and an axe. Their survival was nothing short of miraculous. A few weeks later, all three men separately told of a strange feeling as they were descending that mountain on South Georgia. It was, to quote Ernest Shackleton, as if "often there were four, not three" men on their journey. The presence of the fourth man was as if that of a real person who seemed to walk alongside them as far as their miraculous arrival at the whaling station but no further.

In the space of a sermon—or even a lifetime—we might not be able to explain what happened on the mountainside. And in the journey ahead, as we put one foot in front of the other up or down, we may find mystery which cannot be fathomed. Yet, though we might be but three disciples surrounded by a challenging world, we may find that there is a fourth who travels with us: a presence which stills us, a voice which calls us to listen, a love that will not let go.

So thanks be to God.

Amen.