

St. Ninian's Parish Church
Sunday 11th February 2018
Mark 9: 2 - 9; 2 Kings 2: 1 - 2

I'm trying to think of a word that we in Scotland might use to describe a story that begins, 'he led them up a high mountain,' and continues with, 'Then a cloud appeared...' Would 'mundane' be the most appropriate word? In that context I'm also trying to think of word that describes reaching the top of a mountain whereupon a glorious vision is revealed. I think 'lucky' is about right.

I've twice been to the top of Shiehallion, that pointed mountain overlooking Loch Tummel, down Loch Rannoch all the way to distant Glen Coe. Once, the first time, we slogged our way in to thick cloud, an achievement barely worth the effort. But, the second time I reached the summit the vision was glorious, spectacular, strangely moving. I'm looking for a word that best describes that vision. I think 'transfigured' would be about right.

The story we read from the Gospel of Mark this morning is called the transfiguration of Jesus. It is often read as a mysterious story, difficult to understand, hard to penetrate. But, for anyone who has been anywhere near Scotland's mountains it is not it's mysteriousness that confounds, but it's ordinariness: a high mountain; cloud; disembodied voices; the material world transfigured. The only twist is that on top of the mountain Jesus and his disciples ascended it isn't the view that is transfigured, as we might expect in Scotland, instead after over 3,000 feet of climbing it is your breathless, weary, sweaty, wrapped-up against-the-weather, somewhat haggard travelling companion who is made glorious before your eyes.

For us this story of transfiguration could be overly-familiar, but with only a little bit of imagination and attention to the detail of the story we can quite easily see ourselves standing right there on that mountain top, right beside the others as one of Jesus' disciples.

Every year we read this story on this Sunday, the Sunday before the season of Lent begins on Wednesday. Lent is the season of Jesus' journey to the darkness of Jerusalem from the sparkling springtime of Galilee. Lent, which begins with this glorious vision of transfiguration on a mountain, ends with the terrifying vision of crucifixion on a cross.

The transfiguration begins Lent, the crucifixion marks Lent's end, and in between we will travel with Jesus from Galilee where he has been teaching and healing to Jerusalem where he will be tortured and killed. In both the story of the transfiguration of Jesus and the story of the crucifixion of Jesus, Jesus is lifted up; on the top of a hill in one, on a cross in the other. In both he is lifted up with a person on each side of him; Elijah and Moses in one, two criminals in the other.

Both the transfiguration and the crucifixion are witnessed by three of Jesus' followers, who in both the transfiguration and the crucifixion are overcome, confused. In both the transfiguration and the crucifixion a voice names Jesus as

the Son of God; God speaks himself in one, a centurion speaks the words in the other.

These similarities clearly point to a connection between the transfiguration and the crucifixion. That connection is reinforced by the differences between these two events. In the transfiguration Jesus' clothes are shining, in the crucifixion Jesus is naked. At the transfiguration all around is lit up by a bright light, while at the crucifixion everything is shrouded in darkness. At the transfiguration Elijah the prophet is present. At the crucifixion, Elijah is called for, but does not appear. At the transfiguration Jesus walks down off the hill, at the crucifixion, though asked if he could, Jesus doesn't come down from the cross. At the transfiguration Jesus is exalted, at the crucifixion Jesus is humiliated.

These two events in Jesus' life are not just connected and similar they are the inverse of each other, and they bracket Jesus' journey from Galilee to Jerusalem. The transfiguration also reminds us of two other events in Jesus' life. The words, 'This is my Son, my Beloved,' are said by God both at the transfiguration and at Jesus' baptism. While this shining bright transformation of Jesus at the transfiguration can't but make us think of his resurrection.

Jesus' baptism revealed to us his humanity. He is baptised by John who is offering everyone a baptism for the repentance of sins. Jesus' resurrection reveals to us his divinity. Jesus is a human being like we are; Jesus is divine.

The transfiguration comes at the point in Jesus' life when he is at his most popular and successful. He is in Galilee, he has been teaching and healing and gathering disciples and followers. He has of course been making enemies along the way. His obedience to God leads people to believe in him as their Saviour, but it also threatens the established order so much that it will lead to his crucifixion, the low point of Jesus' life: at that point no one is listening, no one is being healed, his followers have fled in fear.

At Jesus' baptism we learn that he is a human being in this world, at his transfiguration we learn that he is someone who is out of this world, at his crucifixion we will learn that he is at the mercy of this world, at his resurrection we learn that he is triumphant over this world.

This Sunday we celebrate the transfiguration, we who are followers of Jesus. We are his disciples standing beside him on that mountaintop. We need to imagine ourselves there in order to remember that this person Jesus who we have been following is out of this world because we will be there also in six weeks time with him at the cross when he is crucified. In six weeks we will celebrate both Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday in the one service.

On that Sunday we will enter Jerusalem with Jesus after we have been on the hard road of Lent over the coming weeks, but we will also stay with him through his crucifixion. We can't be in the presence of his glory and not be there when he is humiliated. Then on Easter Sunday we will be more alive to the significance of the transformative resurrection.

There is a medical theory about pain, which is supported by experimental evidence. If you experience pain over a period of time, when asked to recall what that pain felt like you remember three things about it. You remember what the pain was like at its most intense, and what it was like at its least intense, and you average these things out. So if there are more moments when the pain dips in intensity then that is what you remember, and then you are more likely to report that, overall, the pain wasn't too bad.

If it is the other way around and there are moments when the pain peaks in intensity, then you report that overall the pain was awful. These peaks and troughs average themselves out. If there are more peaks than troughs then people are more likely to report that the pain overall was terrible. If there are more troughs than peaks then people are more likely to report that the pain wasn't too bad.

But, that is not all. The most significant moment for influencing what you remember of the pain is what it was like at the very end. If there is little pain throughout the period, but a short, sharp peak right at the very end, then you report that the pain was awful throughout. If there is a lot of pain throughout, but a sudden dip right at the very end, then people report that the pain wasn't too bad overall. To put all this another way: peaks and troughs matter - and how many peaks and troughs there are matter a lot, but what matters most are endings.

That is also true of life. Peaks and troughs matter for how you remember your life, and the number of peaks and troughs matter because you average them out. But, what makes the biggest impression is what your life is like at its end.

For Jesus, the transfiguration is a peak, the crucifixion a trough. The end of his story is his resurrection, which is why his story endures. For us, who follow Jesus, we who in believing in him share his life, these peaks and troughs are experienced by us as well. Our belief that his personhood and the story attached to it has the ability to save us has its peaks. There are times when our faith lifts us up; lifts our spirits, lifts our lives; lifts us up out of the miry clay; makes us to lie down in green pastures; guides us on the right path through valleys as dark as death; our faith will comfort us as if a table has been spread in the face off all that threatens us in life.

Yet, too, our faith also has its troughs. Our faith will put us at the mercy of this world, for like Jesus we live not as this world lives. Faith's troughs will feel like a heavy cross to bear at times. It will be a service to others rather than a benefit to ourselves. It will be a brave stand for justice not unlike martyrdom. It will be mocked, laughed at, suspected, questioned.

In faith, as in life, there are peaks and troughs, but we also live in light of the end of Jesus' life. However many peaks and troughs there are, the resurrection, which ensured that the faith endured, has the power to transform us so that in sharing our lives with the life of Jesus Christ our lives come to have a significance that is lasting, everlasting, that contributes forever to the building up of the Kingdom of God.

This Sunday, the Sunday before Lent is the highest peak in Jesus' life; the

transfiguration of Jesus that affirms to us that he is out of this world. But, to truly appreciate the significance of this event we need to be there through the coming weeks of Lent and we need to be there with him at the lowest point in his life. Then, and only then, after we have experienced the peaks and the troughs can we can experience the power of the end of the story, the transformation of the resurrection.