

Last year I donated a microscope to a group going out to the Gambia and wondered if it was, after many years of neglect on my part, now being put to proper use.

Being used by a child discovering, perhaps for the very first time, what had previously been viewed as a speck of dust is in fact something full of colour, pattern and interest; the mundane, being transformed into something awesome.

An apt analogy, perhaps, for understanding the narrative of our gospel; The Transfiguration of Christ.

Not a metamorphism such as when a tadpole becomes a toad, but a transfiguration of beauty inducing a response of awe and wonder as Jesus is transfigured and becomes radiant in glory upon a mountain.

Tradition has it that the mountain was Mount Tabor in central Galilee and the current Franciscan monastery sitting atop the mountain was built on the ruins of a Byzantine church dating back to the 4th century. There is no denying that the panoramic view from that mountain top takes one's breath away, particularly on a clear sunlit day.

But it is not the view I remember most, but the death defying, terrifying high speed taxi ride down the single winding road afterwards. Never have my prayers been so fervent, particularly when we met another taxi coming round a blind bend.

I have been in some precarious situations in my life but never have I been so frightened. Just like Peter perhaps, who is so confused and terrified not only as his senses are dazzled by the intensely white and radiant clothes of Jesus but also the unexplained and unexpected appearance of Elijah and Moses standing each side of Jesus.

Jane tells the story that as I got out of my taxi, I said what a shame that's over. I'm not so sure, but it interestingly parallels Peter's attempt to prolong his experience by blurting out – let's make three tents.

As an aside, I think the sheer stupidity of Peter's words gives credence to the basic truth of the story. No one inventing a story like this would deflect or diminish the importance of the event by including such a comic moment.

And if that wasn't enough he's suddenly aware of a cloud overshadowing them, out of which a voice says: "This is my beloved Son, listen to him".

Listen to what? The voice imparts no new revelatory information, but it does direct the disciples' attention back to what Jesus had been teaching them thus far and would continue to reveal to them:

that rejection, suffering, death and resurrection are integral to his earthly mission.

Thus far, Jesus has metaphorically led his disciples up the high mountain to view the new Kingdom of God; the kingdom where they should expect the unexpected.

Now Jesus is literally taking his select few up the high mountain and inviting them, like the child in Gambia looking through the microscope – to see afresh what they hadn't been able to see before.

This, to me, is the miracle revealed at the transfiguration. Jesus is bathed in glory and radiance that is more brilliant than anything else existing on earth; in other words, unearthly. This is the sign that he hasn't been fantasizing about God's kingdom; that he is speaking the truth.

Stood between the giver of the law and prophet taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire, he reveals himself to be the true prophet; the true Messiah.

But as we read in the final verse, on the way down the mountain, Jesus tells his disciples to tell no one about what they had seen, until the Son of Man had risen from the dead; to quote Jesus out of context at the wedding in Cana he might be saying ‘my hour has not yet come’.

The hour, or the time when God’s salvation is fulfilled through Christ’s death and resurrection.

Unlike Peter, James and John, we know the events which follow on from that visit to the mountain top. That puts us in the privileged position to be able to examine as it were, through the lens of the microscope I spoke about earlier, the transfiguration within the context of salvation

If you examine it closely then you see that Christ’s transfiguration offers up a number of interesting parallels and contrasts with his crucifixion:

- The mountain top parallels the hill top
- On one Jesus is revealed in his glory on the other revealed in shame
- He is clothed in radiant intense white at the transfiguration yet his blood stained clothes are stripped off him and gambled over at the cross
- He is flanked by two of Israel’s greats - Elijah and Moses – and by two common criminals

- A bright cloud overshadows the transfiguration; yet daylight is plunged into darkness at his death
- At one God declares ‘this is my son’ at the other a pagan centurion declares Jesus to be the son of God

And so on....

Perhaps, we don’t get to understand the transfiguration unless we look at it side by side with the crucifixion. Or as the theologian Tom Wright puts it “Unless we see the cross in the glory we will fail to see the glory in the cross”

There are other parallels too.

At both his baptism and the transfiguration God is heard to say of Jesus “this is my beloved son”; in Mark’s version of the resurrection there are three witness to Jesus’ tomb being open; the same number as at his transfiguration

and shortly before Moses’ death God promises to send the Israelites a new prophet and tells them they must “listen to him”.

The exact same words that God speaks to Peter, James and John.

And those same words should resound for us today, each of us is called to do what the heavenly voice said: 'Listen to Jesus'. As we listen, we might at times be frightened, we might say things somewhat impetuously without thinking but we might also begin to see the glory that is in the cross and the cross that is in the glory.

There is much more to be revealed in the transfiguration of Jesus and my prayer is that something I have said today will encourage you to listen to Jesus more closely.

I am convinced that listening to Jesus changes our lives and if we do hear and believe and follow Jesus as the way of life, then on that final day of judgement we shall be one of the gathered which our psalmist referred to.

The transfiguration narrative not only affirms Jesus' status as God's beloved Son but is a powerful demand for us to pick up our cross and follow Christ. And as we do we must continue to listen.