

For many years we've had a fairly substantial microscope which belonged to Jane in our garage. Although still in full working order, it just sat there unused in its wooden box. Just before lockdown we donated it to a group from St. Michael's going out to the Gambia in the hope that at long last, it would be put to proper use.

We imagined it 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.

I don't mean something which is metamorphized such as when a tadpole becomes a toad, but a transfiguration of beauty which induces 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. As we discovered when we visited last year 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. I proved the old adage is correct - that prayer is at its most fervent when you are scared stiff.

A bit like Peter perhaps. The poor chap is so confused and terrified he blurt's out the first thing that comes into his head - let's make three tents.

As an aside, I think the sheer stupidity of Peter's words gives credence to the basic truth of this 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.

In his ministry thus far, Jesus has metaphorically led his disciples up many beaten tracks in Galilee to show them the new Kingdom of God; the kingdom where they should expect the unexpected.

Now Jesus is literally taking his select few up a 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. That in itself invokes unearthliness. 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 the 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”. I wonder if hearing those words for a second time gives Jesus the impetus to start his final journey to Jerusalem, knowing he is travelling to his death yet assured it is the right and only thing he should be doing.

And what of Peter, James, and John. Well, they are told to listen to Jesus. And those same words should resonate for us today, each of us is called to do what the heavenly voice said: ‘Listen to him’.

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. Amen

Revd. Terry Ward-Hall, 19 Feb 2023