

The Transfiguration (Luke 9:28-43)

²⁸ About eight days after Jesus said this, he took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray. ²⁹ As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. ³⁰ Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendour, talking with Jesus. ³¹ They spoke about his departure,^[a] which he was about to bring to fulfilment at Jerusalem. ³² Peter and his companions were very sleepy, but when they became fully awake, they saw his glory and the two men standing with him. ³³ As the men were leaving Jesus, Peter said to him, "Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." (He did not know what he was saying.)

³⁴ While he was speaking, a cloud appeared and covered them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. ³⁵ A voice came from the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him." ³⁶ When the voice had spoken, they found that Jesus was alone. The disciples kept this to themselves and did not tell anyone at that time what they had seen.

Jesus Heals a Demon-Possessed Boy

³⁷ The next day, when they came down from the mountain, a large crowd met him. ³⁸ A man in the crowd called out, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son, for he is my only child. ³⁹ A spirit seizes him and he suddenly screams; it throws him into convulsions so that he foams at the mouth. It scarcely ever leaves him and is destroying him. ⁴⁰ I begged your disciples to drive it out, but they could not."

⁴¹ "You unbelieving and perverse generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you and put up with you? Bring your son here."

⁴² Even while the boy was coming, the demon threw him to the ground in a convulsion. But Jesus rebuked the impure spirit, healed the boy and gave him back to his father. ⁴³ And they were all amazed at the greatness of God.



By Raphael

(Images sourced from the internet)



By Reubens

This scripture and story come round every year and it's a good question to ask, what do we get out of it?

We have the remarkable visual transformation of Jesus. The appearance of the two great heroes of the Israelite people Moses and Elijah. This is contrasted by the feeble humanity of Peter, James, and John first of all asleep, then Peter's blundering comments and then so uncertain about it that they tell no-one. All taking place on the mountain top.

Then the second story is of the remaining nine disciples at their wits end, they cannot heal the troubled boy. A desperate father, a large crowd, this poor unhappy boy and a rather strange angry outburst from Jesus.

"You unbelieving and perverse generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you and put up with you?"

What is that about???

This year I thought we would explore the text via two paintings, one by Raphael (said to be his finest) and one by Rubens.

I was reading about the Raphael painting and quite a few people couldn't understand why he had painted two separate and distinct stories in the one painting. As we shall see they are intimately linked.

Jesus is transfigured and that's heightened by him floating above ground as are Moses and Elijah.

To one side we have two new characters who are probably Justus and Pastor. They are two Christian martyrs to whom the church, in which the painting was initially intended to be placed, is dedicated.

We see Peter, James and John lying on the ground and I think the image of John is the one that makes me chuckle – there a bit of “oh it's all too much” in the painting.

Down below the nine disciples are on the left. Furthest out and in darkest hues is Judas Iscariot. Matthew is in the foreground holding a book – it's to symbolise that they have done all they can to heal the boy.

On the right we have the crowd, the father and the poor boy and in the centre a woman (his mother??) pointing with both hands to the boy.

The painting by Rubens is very similar. Jesus, Moses and Elijah are standing on clouds rather than just floating. We have no extra characters, the disciples seem more afraid of what is happening to the boy, there's a man in a turban praying towards the disciples.

There is a significant difference in the two paintings. In the Reubens the only person pointing is the woman pointing to the boy and Matthew, with the book, vaguely pointing to heaven. But if you look closely, Elijah is looking at the scene and he is pointing to Jesus.

In the Raphael, two are pointing towards Jesus (green and red arms), one to the boy, the woman pointing both arms to the boy and a man in the crowd with his hand open to heaven.

What are the artists reinforcing, what was Luke telling us?

We live in the valleys with the problems and difficulties we are only too aware of...our own and others. If we only focus on the problems, they can be overwhelming. If we only focus on our own inability to solve the problems, we reach a place of despair. The answer is Jesus.

The glimpse of him in his glory is in stark contrast to the Easter scene where he hangs on a cross arms outstretched, but both scenes are critical to us.

Jesus' death is not the end of all hope but his self-giving that we might have life. His resurrection demonstrates he is master over life and death. His transfiguration reminds us of his power and glory and majesty...who he really is.

In the Reubens picture Elijah is looking at the problem and pointing to Jesus. Here is the answer. In the Raphael two of the disciples are pointing to Jesus. Here is the answer.

But I was struck by another contrast – this is a tale of two sons.

God speaks "This is my Son whom I have chosen, listen to him"

In despair another father speaks, "teacher I beg you to look at my son, he is my only child."

The one Son has the power to release and save the other son.

So why the angry outburst???

Eugene Peterson interprets Jesus words this way and it's to the disciples that he is speaking.

What a generation. No sense of God. No focus to your lives. How many times do I have to go over these things? How much longer do I have to put up with this? Bring your son here.

Jesus has weighty things on his mind and he feels like he's back at the beginning with the disciples.

Jesus has been speaking and planning his exodus. The journey to Jerusalem, his death, his resurrection, his ascension the mission completed. He's training up the disciples and they have been given power and authority to heal...but it's all fallen apart.

Quite simply I think Jesus had a moment of despair – which I quite like to see, it shows his humanity just as the transfiguration showed his divinity.

BUT. Even in his frustration with the disciples, Jesus has compassion for the boy and heals him.

The Father tells us to listen to the Son and Jesus describes the disciples as perverse and unbelieving.

It's tempting isn't it to point to the problems and feel the anxiety of not being able to resolve the issues we face...the answer is in the image of the transfigured Christ. Here is the one with the power to save...

Revd. Jon Hutchinson, 2 March 2025