

# **Sermon on Sunday 14 February 2021**

## **by The Venerable Janet Mackenzie,**

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*Readings: 2 Corinthians 4. 3-6; Mark 9. 2-9*

#### **Transfiguration of our Lord**

I was very fortunate to have the opportunity when training for Ordination to join a study tour to Jerusalem where we were introduced to many people of a wide range of religious and political persuasions. One group that made a lasting impact was a Lutheran project supporting women on the West Bank in Palestine. Signs of conflict are everywhere in their lives. Piles of rubble mark bulldozed homes and shops. Walls and barbed wire divide neighbours. Broken glass litters the streets. And yet a group of fearless women leave their homes to collect the glittering, dangerous shards of glass and take them to art workshops sponsored by the Lutheran Church. There they transform these signs of pain into signs of hope by using the glass to create brightly coloured glass angels that capture the sun and reflect God's presence.

Sadly, bombs have continued to shatter more glass and more lives have been lost. But those handcrafted symbols of hope remind us of the bigger picture – that God intends to gather all creation to himself, to heal all that is wrong in the world and in our lives.

However, it does not happen according to our timetable – we rarely get a glimpse of that bigger picture that God sees – so we do have to trust in the faithfulness of God.

Today's Gospel reading tells us of the Transfiguration of Christ. Exactly what happened on the mountain that day is something we don't know. We weren't there and we have to rely on the accounts in the Gospels. But from the way the Transfiguration is described,

the Gospel writers clearly saw it as God's confirmation of Jesus as the passionate Messiah, the Messiah who suffers.

The event which we call the Transfiguration of Christ took place eight days after Peter had proclaimed Jesus to be the Messiah, the Christ. Jesus had asked, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" Some answered, "John the Baptist"; but others, "Elijah"; and still others that, "One of the ancient prophets has arisen". Jesus then said to the disciples, "But who do you say that I am?" and it was Peter who said, "The Messiah of God".

In his response to Peter's answer, Jesus describes to the disciples that the Messiah must endure a series of trials leading up to his death and resurrection. This was not at all what the disciples expected to hear. These words did not fit with their dreams and ambitions. They must have wondered if they were hearing Jesus correctly. They thought Jesus could have it all and suffering, pain and death wasn't in their plan. But it was in God's plan.

So, eight days after Peter's confession and Jesus' explanation about his coming passion, Jesus took three of his disciples – Peter, James and John – up the mountain to pray. We don't know what Jesus prayed for but we do know what happened next. For, as Jesus speaks with Moses, the giver of God's law, and with Elijah, arguably the greatest of all the prophets, he becomes certain that his call from God is more awful and more important than either of theirs.

Ahead of Jesus lies the Last Supper, the agony in Gethsemane, the arrest, the beatings, the trials and his crucifixion, death and burial. The Transfiguration confirms Jesus' belief that his Father in heaven wants a passionate Messiah. It convinces the disciples that Jesus really is the Messiah. And, most important of all, it convinces Jesus that he is truly that Messiah.

It seems Peter is giddy with excitement over what he is witnessing. But then the cloud envelops them.

From the cloud comes a voice saying, "This is my Son, my Beloved; listen to him". And now a more sombre mood settles over the disciples, a sense of foreboding. As hard as it is to believe, perhaps they really are heading for Jerusalem and the events Jesus has outlined will really happen.

So, what does it mean for us today that Jesus is God's passionate Messiah? Does it mean that Jesus' death on the cross eliminates evil and suffering from the world? Obviously not – it doesn't take the unexplained death of a one-year-old, the treatment of people of colour or the attack of a man in Stevenage, who died yesterday, to convince us that sin still has a foothold in the world. Evil still raises its head with every racial slur, every grab for power, every murderous shot and every person abused in any way. What happens in Jesus' passion is not that God eliminates evil but that he takes it on in a face-to-face encounter. On the cross and in the events leading up to it, Jesus does not deny that evil is what it is. He takes it on.

Later his disciples learn to bear the cross for themselves and to confront the powers of this world. And that is precisely what each of us, as His church, is called to do. "If any want to become my followers," Jesus says, "let them deny themselves, take up their cross daily and follow me." (Luke 9. 23). On the cross died God's suffering Messiah, but the power of the cross is to confront evil in all its forms and to boast in the victory of God. The cross changes how we deal with evil. Sin is sin and evil is evil but it does not have the last word.

To take up the cross means to expose human sin and evil in all its ugly forms; child abuse, racial bigotry, murder, slander and gossip, and all forms of violence and hatred. And this is what we must do –

expose these evils, for their time is limited and their defeat certain if each of us takes action.

For this is what Jesus did. Jesus dared to expose, challenge and correct evil when he saw it. That's why his Passion was a certainty. When you engage evil and suffering in a one-to-one battle you do not always come out victorious. Many have died or been killed trying. But when we proclaim that Jesus Christ is our Saviour we are saying that in Jesus' Passion, God took on evil. And God won.

Through Jesus' resurrection we have a hope that outshines any kind of death or horror humanity can devise. And hope leads us back to the Transfiguration.

The Transfiguration is the day when we see Jesus for who he truly is and so we see ourselves. We are filled with light and that light is meant to pour forth and transform our minds and our hearts and our bodies and our actions. No matter whether we see ourselves as small or unimportant, too young or too old, a success or a failure in the eyes of the world, none of that matters today. We are the beloved of God, filled with glory, called to glory. And we are called and empowered to be God's own so that in Christ we transform, each day, everything that we are and do and say, so that it reflects the glory of God. An important thought on this Valentine's Day.

Everything – thoughts and words and actions, body and soul, time and talent and treasure – all is to be a vessel for the blinding glory of God. And it is to be as natural as breathing, as effortless and liberating. Surely a challenge in these days of pandemic. So, we must use our own diversity and influences on our lives to review our Christian journey to meet our truly loving powerful God who will strengthen and embrace us.

Let us pray that, this day and every day, we may be transformed into the people God wants each of us to be.