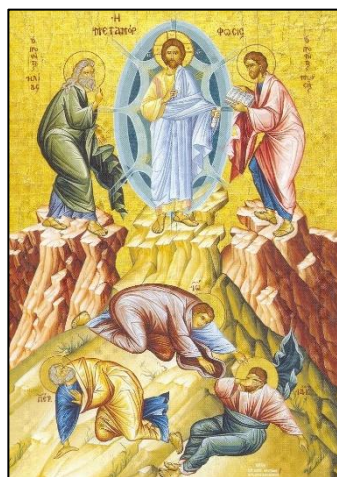


**Glitter like Gold – Sermon by Rev Phil Wootton (Mark 9: 2-9 & 2 Kings 2: 1-12)
Sunday 11 February 2024**

They say, 'All that glitters is not gold,' but, entering Valetta's co-cathedral on the island of Malta, our guide remarked, 'All that glitters, here, probably is gold!' The gold really does glitter on the walls and archways, on the altar and reredos, on the organ, lectern and chairs. Gold shimmers and shines without getting tarnished. It's a sign of opulence and luxury. It's hard to come by, requiring sifting and refining, producing tiny amounts from great labour. It shows off power and wealth: in Malta, the wealth and power of the Grand Masters of the Knights of St John. And it is a sign of worship – the gift of the best you can offer, and the exaltation of the spirit towards the divine. Through gold, the things of earth seem transfigured into the things of heaven.



In my imagination, Jesus' transfiguration was against a golden background, as suggested by icons representing the scene. It's all about transcendence. Here, the appearance of Jesus the man is transfigured, clothes whiter than white. Here, balancing on dramatic crags, the three figures are almost in heaven. Here, the three disciples, half blinded, tumble down the mountainside. Here, encompassing Jesus and emanating from Jesus, is the cloud of God's holy presence. Time and space are transcended as Jesus communes with these titans of the Old Testament, Moses and Elijah, and is affirmed by the voice of the Father: 'This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him.'

Why Moses and Elijah? Why them in particular? Moses was the great law-giver, and Elijah, the first and greatest of the prophets. Jesus came to fulfil what was said in both the Law and the Prophets. His actions would follow the flow of God's purposes revealed in the Old Testament. According to tradition the mountain they met on was Mount Tabor – and both could be said to be mountain men. Elijah's greatest feat was on Mount Carmel, defeating the prophets of Baal, and later, Mount Horeb. For Moses, Mount Sinai was where he spent weeks chiselling out the tablets of the law. Both also had great journeys across the desert – Moses leading the people at the exodus; Elijah, his epic solo journey from Carmel to Horeb. Both encountered God in fire: the burning bush for Moses and fire from heaven for Elijah. Both knew God was not to be messed with. Food: for Moses, manna in the desert, and for Elijah, bread brought by ravens. Both at times believed themselves indispensable, with no one to take their place, but both left successors – Joshua followed after Moses, and Elisha after Elijah (inheriting a double portion of his spirit.) For both, their lives on earth ended east of the Jordan: Elijah, as we heard in the reading, whisked away to heaven by the chariots and horsemen of Israel; Moses alone in the hills around Mount Nebo, and, we are told, was buried by the Lord God himself. For both, there were myths and expectations of their return.

Most important of all, both knew God. Both had unique (but not easy) relationships with God. Elijah is presented as the one who stands before the face of the living God. 1 Kings 17: 1 – Elijah addresses King Ahab: ‘As the Lord God of Israel lives, in whose presence I stand.’ Moses is presented as the Lord’s more intimate confidante. Exodus 33: 11 – ‘The Lord would talk to Moses, face to face, as a man talks to his friend.’ Elijah’s prayer is always looking into the face of God, and got things done! Moses was a powerful intercessor with God: he ‘stood in the breach before him to turn away the Lord’s anger’ (Psalm 106: 23). For both, their prayers at times involved wrestling matches with God, trying to get to grips with God’s purposes: ‘Why did you do this, when it would all end up like that?’ They both had times when they were plunged into deep despair, loneliness and desolation. It was as if they were being sifted and refined: ultimately, they would shine with the radiance of God.

The transfiguration is a mountaintop experience, and, as you know, I love mountaintops. Attaining the summit, you feel exhilaration and wonder, or simply the satisfaction of having made it. From there, you enjoy the view and get a sense of the landscape through you’re about to travel, or else get above the clouds for an otherworldly experience. But mountaintops are often not in themselves attractive places. They are often bare and rocky, windswept and featureless, with mosses and lichens the only no vegetation able to withstand the icy blast and crashing storms. The encounters Moses and Elijah had with God on their mountains were tough. But it was through them that they were transformed.

The Transfiguration is given to us each year in the lectionary for the Sunday before Lent. A bit like the fun and feasting pancakes on Shrove Tuesday, it can feel like gorging on the glory of gold before the rigours of Lent begin. It reminds us to prepare well for Lent, itself a preparation for Easter; to think about the right challenge for ourselves this year – not automatically doing the same as before; not giving ourselves impossible challenges that will be given up after a few days; but choosing to do something worthwhile. It may be giving up something for Lent, or it may be simply refusing to give up!

The transfiguration is not just a dazzling event from the remote past. It is ever present in the church, taking place each moment in the heart of the believer who responds to the heavenly voice on Tabor, ‘This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him.’ To listen in prayer is to enter with Moses and Elijah into the glory of Jesus shining through him on Tabor. When we share such a communion of love, there is always an inner change that takes place; we are, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3: 18 ‘are being transfigured into his likeness.’

Prayer is an invitation to surrender in advance, here and now, to the searching flame of God’s transforming love and to open ourselves, unreservedly, to the refining fire of his gentle touch. To pray is to be with Jesus, ‘to look to him and be radiant’ with his glory (Psalm 33: 6). Become what glitters as pure spiritual gold.