The transfiguration Mark 9

Our reading from Mark’s Gospel comes directly after Jesus had been talking to the disciples about his own death. He told them that anyone who wishes to follow him must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow him. He also says that whoever loses his/her life for Jesus sake shall save it.

These are strong words about the importance of following Jesus – as we know salvation, saving our eternal lives, is through following Jesus and we should be prepared to make sacrifices in order to follow him.

But Jesus words, that he was going to Jerusalem to die must have been very hard for his disciples to hear. It was not what they expected of their Messiah, to die in such a disgraced way. The Messiah was meant to rescue them and save them, not meekly die like that, and it was also of course personally painful for them to think that their friend and leader was going to die and was going to leave them.

Then a week later Jesus’ glory, his divinity is revealed in the transfiguration. The Bible tells us that Jesus went with his closest friends – Peter, James and John up a high mountain. And there his true identity is revealed. Mark describes his garments as radiant. The word he uses is *stilbein* which is the glistening of gold or the golden glare of sunlight. In fact the word ‘transformed’ in verse 2 gives us the English word metamorphosis – a change on the outside that comes from the inside. Here, the disciples clearly see who Jesus really, he is more than a man, his divinity is revealed. And even if the disciples do not yet understand why Jesus has to die in Jerusalem, they know that he is special and much more than a special man.

And there is more to affirm that Jesus is the Messiah, that he is divine. For he is joined by Moses and Elijah. It must have been incredible for those disciples to see these important figures from their Jewish heritage there in front of them, meeting with and talking to Jesus.

Moses was the great law giver – he delivered God’s people from slavery and brought them the 10 commandments. In Exodus 24 Moses face shone after he had been talking with God.

Elijah was the greatest of the prophets – he brought people the very voice of God.

Here on the mountain top, Peter James and John see that Jesus is the consummation of all that God’s chosen people had dreamt and prophesied in the past. He was the fulfilment of God’s law and the prophecies. He was the one all their history had hoped for and looked forward to. Jesus, though fully human, is also more than just a man, he is divine – his identity is revealed as he meets and talks with Moses and Elijah.

And it gets even more amazing. A cloud overshadowed the three of them and God is heard speaking ‘this is my beloved son, hear him’.

In the Old Testament God is encountered in a cloud – Moses met God in a cloud. God came to the tabernacle in a cloud. The cloud filled the temple after Solomen had built it. And the Jewish people believed that when the Messiah came the cloud of God’s presence would return to the temple. So, God appearing in the cloud at this point clearly lets the disciples know that Jesus is the Messiah and God himself tells them that Jesus is his son.

So straight after Jesus predicts his death, God shows that Jesus is the Messiah – Jesus death and the salvation of the Messiah are linked . Perhaps the disciples did not understand why Jesus would submit to evil and suffer, but the transfiguration shows that Jesus is glorified, his divinity is revealed, when he does that.

Jesus’ instructions earlier to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him now have extra meaning. Because of Jesus’ divinity we are saved by his suffering, and triumph over evil and death. To follow him we need to sacrifice our egos, to say ‘no’ to temptations, and to serve and to live for others. We die to self and rise reborn as his followers for eternity.

Finally, I’d like to think of Peter’s response – he wants to construct 3 dwellings or shelters there on the mountain top – one for Jesus, one for Moses and one for Elijah. Peter must have been so troubled hearing Jesus talk of his coming death but there on the mountain Peter must have felt safe with Jesus, Moses and Elijah. I can’t blame Peter for wanting to stay there, away from the religious authorities and those scheming and plotting against Jesus.

I think many of us can probably relate to how Peter felt. We may have a particular church or special place where we have encountered God or where we feel close to him, a place we feel particularly safe with God, a place of healing and refreshment and that’s wonderful.

But Jesus doesn’t stay up on the mountain top, he goes to Jerusalem and dies on the cross. And Jesus tells us to take up our cross and follow him – we are called to go to places and situations and maybe people that we would rather avoid. In our liturgy at the end of a service, we are called to ‘go in peace to love and serve the Lord’ – and as disciples we follow Jesus back into the world, wherever he wants us to go.