

**Transfiguration**  
**15/2/2015**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Isaiah 6:1-8**

**Psalm 50**

**2 Corinthians 4:3-6**

**Mark 9:2-8**

**Transfiguration**

Sermon preached by Rev. Rob Gallacher

---

The most famous icon of the Transfiguration is the apse mosaic in the monastery of St Catherine's at Mt Sinai. It dates from the 6<sup>th</sup> century and is still in perfect condition. But to see it you have to go into a side chapel and stare at it from an oblique angle. More than a thousand years after the church was decorated, a four posted canopy, a baldachin, was built over the altar, and it obscures the view of the transfiguration. I once read a remark by an Abbot that no miracles had occurred in the church since the apse was obscured. You may interpret that as you wish. I want only to use it a mental picture, framework, for us to consider how we erect barriers to protect us from the vision.

In 2 Corinthians Paul talks about the veil that prevents belief - the god of this world blinds the mind (2 Cor. 4: 4). But we are to let the light of God's glory in Christ shine in the darkness. Paul had his own experience of the light of Christ on the Damascus road, as did Moses on Mt Sinai, or Isaiah in the temple, and in today's reading, the disciples on the mount of Transfiguration. In each case the brilliance of the light is a problem. Paul goes blind, Moses veils his face, Isaiah says he is not worthy, and the disciples fumble around, not knowing what to say. The vision of the glory of God is too bright for us to bear, yet without it we fade away.

The first time I heard this story I was dutifully attending Sunday School. The teacher told the story, and that was all right. But then she did a terrible thing. She added a sentence. "This can happen, early on a sunny morning on the top of a mountain covered in snow." She turned an epiphany into a picnic. Worse, she gave me a model that I applied to all the awkward bits: At the feeding of the 5,000 they all had lunches hidden away, where Jesus walked on water there was a rocky protrusion making the water shallow, the resurrection was the result of Jesus going into a deep trance and so on. The need to reduce the gospel to something we can easily comprehend is a barrier.

Back in the 1970's James Fowler wrote "Stages of Faith", setting out what kind of material children could understand and accept at each developmental stage. Christian educationalists loved it, and lesson material changed accordingly. It is hard to prove a direct relationship, but it was at the same time that Sunday Schools collapsed. Anniversary platforms and Songs of praise were out and glossy graded lessons leading on to group discussion were in. Somewhere in there a massive barrier was erected, and Epiphany became a funny word attached to a season on the church's calendar, routinely observed, but seldom productive of vision and inspiration. It was a situation that caused James Loder to write a critique of Fowler called "The Transforming Moment". It spoke more of a defining experience, a moment when a greater reality, a deeper meaning, is suddenly apprehended. Loder's book did not have the same currency in the rationalistic climate of the day. But it exposed some of the barriers separating us from a vision of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

So one contemporary barrier is the realism that eliminates the not yet, that insists that the way things are is the way things will always be. In that cold climate, the world shrinks and human arrogance grows.

If this were a seminar instead of a sermon, I would now put you into groups and ask you to discuss your own barriers. I would expect to get “I can’t believe what I can’t understand”, or “My professional training compels me to think thus”, or maybe “I had a bad experience as a child” or even “I was brought up in Christian home”.

It is the nature of an Epiphany that witnesses cannot capture its full meaning. It will take you out of your comfort zone. The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. The eye of faith will see all kinds of things of which you cannot be certain. The light of Christ causes you to see the world differently.

Just look at the connections in this account of the Transfiguration, and it will blow your mind. Light is God’s first act of creation, while Christ, the light of the world is the first act of new creation. The mountain was where Moses received the Law, the basis of the first covenant, while Jesus gives a new law on the mount of the beatitudes and dies on Mount Calvary, and a mountain is the site of the new Jerusalem (Rev 21:10). The cloud is everywhere, from that which led Israel out of Egypt, surrounded Moses on Mt Sinai, to the Ascension and the picture in Revelation of Jesus returning on a cloud, and beyond Scripture to the Cloud of Unknowing in mystical devotion. The voice connects with the voice at the Baptism of Jesus, affirming his divinity, “This is my beloved Son”. The shining face reminds us of Moses. The white robe is heavenly clothing (Rev. 4:4 and 6:11), while the presence of Elijah signals the imminence of the new kingdom.

If that is not sufficient to refresh your vision and shift a few barriers, be like Isaiah, and let the symbols in the church come to life. Contemplate the empty cross and let it take you into resurrection life, look at the open Bible and let the Word speak. Touch the water of baptism to your forehead let the significance of your belonging to the messianic age sink in. As you consume the bread not only does the life of Christ dwell within you, but even more significantly, you dwell in Christ. See yourself in the company of Moses and Elijah, see Christ transfigured, and not just Christ, but the world transfigured into the kingdom of God, reflecting the glory of the face of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The best sermon on the Transfiguration I ever heard was given by Desmond Tutu. At the National Christian Youth Convention in Ballarat, I think it was 1985, he applied the Transfiguration to South Africa under apartheid. He told stories of personal struggle, persecution and suffering. A young man called Tom returned from prison to his faith community, and there was vision there, and hope. The transfiguration of Christ flows into the transfiguration of human community, light for the world shines back down the mountain. Tutu reached the climax. His eyes bulged like saucers, his black face shone, his hands went out, and the voice said, “This vision will lift us up, up.....up .....up!”