

Transfiguration Sermon

It's often no fun when you don't understand what is going on. Most of us have at some time or other experienced the situation where someone tells a joke, and the other 4 people in the group all roar with laughter, but you don't get the joke. You feel somehow a bit stupid, and a bit left out.

Every teacher knows the intense discomfort when they see that look of incomprehension on a child's face, if a child is longing to understand something but just can't get it.

In tackling this pandemic, the handling of it has only improved as scientists have started to understand more and more about the virus. Understanding the science will prove to have been our way out of this. And for people who find some of the science a bit baffling, the Deputy Chief Medical Director, Professor Jonathan Van Tam, will always provide an analogy to help us understand what point we've reached. He fairly recently said that learning how to combat this virus was like continuing to build a ship when you were already out on the water – in other words, we didn't have the luxury of understanding it before the havoc started.

The more we understand, the more we can make right decisions, the more we can solve problems.

So, on one level, it's important that we have some understanding of this unreal event, which we call the Transfiguration. My understanding was greatly enriched when I heard a boy from church say in class, when the teacher asked what the Transfiguration was, "Oh, wasn't that the time Jesus took off his disguise?" What a wonderful explanation. Taking off his disguise.

In other words, and I'm indebted to Pam Robson for putting like this, these 3 disciples momentarily see Jesus as he had been before he was man and as he will be when he is again in God's presence and reflecting that glory. They are s

eeing in advance the glory of the risen Lord.

But, given our longing to understand everything, it must have been very hard for Peter, James and John as they walked up this mountain. Jesus has very recently broken the news to them that he will go to Jerusalem, that he will be mistreated, and will die. That flew in the face of the whole nation's understanding of what a Messiah does. Messiahs don't get mistreated and die. But having dropped that bombshell, we don't sense that he made any attempt to explain it. He left them not understanding.

And then, at the top of this mountain, there is this wonderful but hard to understand experience. Jesus is transfigured. Think of bright sunlight gleaming on the snow, and you'll have an idea of the nature of the verb used to describe how his appearance changed.

Then Moses and Elijah appear, and Peter, as if to demonstrate the fact that he's on a completely different page, makes the rather inappropriate suggestion of making 3 little

shelters, because he thought it was something to do with the Jewish festival of shelters. It would have been nice if Jesus had explained, but yet he didn't oblige. It looks as though Peter's inappropriate remark is just left hanging there.

So what was happening? Let's try to see it from Jesus' point of view. He had travelled a lonely road in his mind, arriving at a conclusion that his dying was crucial (incidentally, the word crucial comes from the Latin word CRUX, which means a cross). The cross was central, unavoidable. His disciples had made it clear they didn't want to hear this. So Jesus is in a very lonely place. And now, here are Moses and Elijah, the 2 giants of the Old Testament, standing here with him and they are talking with Jesus about his death. There could not have been a more powerful way of reassuring Jesus that he was indeed taking the right path.

But what about the disciples? In the space of one week, they had gone from hearing that he was going to die, and now seeing him in some kind of glory.

But they still probably didn't understand much, and on the way down he gave them orders not to tell anyone. Why would he do that? He doesn't explain why. Just continues on down the mountain, as they walk behind. He then qualifies that by saying "don't tell anyone what you have seen until the Son of Man has risen from the dead". If they were confused before, now they would be losing the thread completely. The Jews had a firm understanding of resurrection, but it would be of all faithful people together at the end of time. So, the idea that Jesus might rise first, after which they could talk about what they'd seen that day once again shatters the understanding they had received. And yet again, Jesus does not go on to explain. They somehow don't feel able to ask him, and he somehow chooses to leave them discussing amongst themselves what it might all mean.

Understanding other people and what makes the world tick is always right and good. Understanding what Jesus means as far as we can is always good. We must tackle questions that trouble us and not be scared of them.

But sometimes, he calls us just to get on and follow him, even though our understanding is limited. He knows we'll probably understand more later. Or at least, understand as much as we need to. Sometimes we need to relax a little when we don't understand everything.

One thing is for sure, though: these three disciples, after their low-point of a few days earlier, are once again exhilarated. They have been in the presence of majesty. They know it and they're determined more than ever to continue following. Let's do the same.