

‘It is good for us to be here’

There are times – and the last few days have felt like such a time – when everything seems to be falling apart. Just as pandemic restrictions are finally lifted, war begins in Europe. The questions of climate and cultural conflict throb under it all, unceasingly. Civilians are told to defend their homes with Molotov cocktails. It can seem that God is anywhere but here.

But there are also moments in everyday life, if we are lucky, when things all seem to fall into place briefly, things seem to align and conspire to create the feeling of rightness. Perhaps you’re on a walk with your family, and the wind dies down and the clouds part just as you reach the perfect picnic spot, and fruitcake and tea you didn’t know were being carried are produced from a rucksack. The outdoors seems to produce these moments for me, but feel free to fill in your own details: perhaps the feeling arrives over coffee with a friend, or with a card arriving from a grandchild on sunny morning when trees are glowing with blossom. These are moments that you want to celebrate and to bottle, even as they slip past. In my family we have a rather prosaic way of acknowledging this feeling – with the phrase ‘Well this is nice, isn’t it?!’

My friend Ed’s family, who I think must’ve spent more time in church growing up, refer to these moments of alignment as ‘tent moments’ – because of the story we heard this morning, of Jesus made radiant on the mountain, joined suddenly by Moses and Elijah. This is one of those moments when, out of nowhere, things seem to speak of more than themselves: and Peter wants to bottle it, to prolong it, so he suggests putting up three tents, one for Jesus, one for Moses, one for Elijah, so that they can stay. This is a ‘tent moment’, because, as he says, It is good for us to be here. If we are lucky our pasts will be dotted with such moments, so that even though things have often been complicated and uncertain, we can recall these spots of time and say – that was a good moment. It was good for us to be there.

We call this story the ‘transfiguration’, because of the bit where it says the appearance of Jesus’ face and clothes changed, altered somehow, seemed to become bright. I wonder if it’s really the right term for what is going on here. Especially in the era of Harry Potter, we tend to think of transfiguration as something being turned into something else. Professor McGonagall teaches Harry how to transfigure things into other things: a bird becomes a goblet, a person becomes an armchair, a table becomes a tiramisu. This is not what is happening with Jesus on the mountain: Jesus is not being changed into something else. Rather, he becomes more fully himself. Transfiguration in this theological sense is something being changed *into itself*, shown for what it is, made fully and distinctively and resplendently itself.

In our Old Testament reading we heard the story which Luke is half thinking of when he is telling us of Jesus' transfiguration: the story of Moses meeting God on the mountain, and coming back down to the Israelites with his face seemingly glowing. Moses is so lit up with inspiration and insight that he seems to be physically radiant, and it's a bit much for his contemporaries to take in all at once. It's actually because of this story that Moses was for centuries represented with horns: a mistranslation of the very ambiguous Hebrew left medieval scholars thinking that Moses came down from the mountain with spikes sticking out of his head, whereas in fact the Hebrew describes beams of light, like the sun's rays. So for centuries, the church made the 'Harry Potter' mistake: of thinking that the encounter with God changed Moses into something else, some strange horned hybrid – whereas in fact it changed him into himself, someone made fully and radiantly alive.

Just as Moses is made fully alive through his vision of God, so is Jesus made fully alive in that 'tent moment' on the mountain. This does not happen during a moment of great success or public recognition – in fact the opposite. Jesus has been doing his work around Galilee and it is becoming increasingly obvious that the crowd does not understand him. They want a King; at best they think he might be a prophet. They are fixated on the miracles and scandalised by the inclusive politics. So it is with this gathering sense of earthly failure that Jesus begins to look toward Jerusalem, to the inevitable turning of the crowd, toward suffering and the cross. He comes to the mountain to bring all this difficulty and defeat before God, to remember God's characteristic way of finding strength in vulnerability, triumph in failure, and to put his hope in that creative love. It is in this moment of vulnerability, failure, and love that Jesus becomes fully and radiantly himself: radiantly divine, and radiantly human. As the church fathers said, the Glory of God is a human being fully alive, and a human being fully alive is one beholding God. In this moment of simple trust and vulnerability, heaven touches earth, revealing that the human life lived to the pattern of love is itself the divine life. In the original 'tent moment', anticipating the cross, Jesus is changed into *himself*.

I think in our culture and our common life at the moment we are too much in thrall to the wrong kind of transfiguration. We find it easier to imagine that things will improve by being changed into other things, than by becoming more fully themselves. It is easier to hope that a difficult colleague or friend will simply change to be less difficult, than it is to learn to love them in their distinctiveness. It is easier to hope for technological change to fix the climate crisis, than it is to learn to live with the beautiful earth that we have. It is easier to think that a different church would have fewer annoying people in it, than to admit that this church, here, is the body of Christ. Particularly when we are afraid, when the world is so troubled, when wars and crises shake us, it is easy to find ourselves thinking that it would be better to be in another time, another place, away from difficulty, closer to

God. We do not always find it easy to say, with Peter, ‘Master, it is good for us to be here’.

But it is. And in fact this is close to the heart of our faith: that everything that is made and loved by God, and that being itself is good and beautiful. Even and especially when there is suffering and failure and defeat, we are called to stand with the disciples, as witnesses to the possibility of God’s transfiguration, the possibility that love may yet be the answer. We do not have to be changed into something else to be made beautiful: we only have to become more fully ourselves. The world and the people around us do not have to be conquered or subdued, but seen and loved for what they are. It is not always easy to see this, but there are things that help. Art helps, because by making the world strange it reveals the beauty of what is there. Prayer helps, because all our illusions and fantasies prove to be less durable than the patient love that is there at the bottom of things. And ‘Tent moments’ help, because in such moments we can see clearly what is always the case: that this moment, here, now, is enough, is beautiful, is worthy of praise. In these moments we glimpse again the truth: that it is good for us to be here.

Amen.