

May I speak in the name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.

Today is August the 6th, and it's a major feast day in the church. It's the Feast of the Transfiguration. I say it's a major feast, but it's also a very neglected feast, especially in the church in the west. Although I did discover whilst preparing this sermon that the transfiguration was a feast day of full status in the Episcopal church before it was in the church of England. So that's one up to the Americans there. And this should be a significant story for us because it's a story where one of the key witnesses was one of our own, St. James. He was there to see this great event that happened on top of the mountain.

It's often not received its proper attention, this story of transfiguration, because it's a very ... well, it's not just that it's an odd story and very unusual. It's also a story that doesn't seem to quite fit. It jars with the rest of the gospel narrative. It doesn't seem to quite fit in. Much of the story in the rest of Luke, as indeed in all the gospels, is much easier to relate to. It's a story about Jesus who's recognizable as a religious teacher, a teacher that goes around saying great things, telling stories, performing healings. He prays. He gets tired. On occasions even a bit scratchy. But what we have in this story, the gospel that we heard today, the story of transfiguration is very different, very different tone. The one who is transfigured is no ordinary mortal. There's something else going on here. It's got a different tone.

But before I say anything more about that, I just want to say something about the context in which this story comes in the gospel. It's right in the middle of Luke's gospel. In fact, all the gospel writers were Matthew, Mark, and Luke. They all have their story, and each of them have it right in the middle of the gospel narrative. And there's a reason for that. That's not an accident. It's because this is the pivotal moment in the whole gospel story. In all the gospels, this story of transfiguration comes straight after Peter has recognized Jesus as the messiah for the first time. You might remember that story where Jesus says, "Who do people say that I am?" And Peter says, "You are the messiah, the son of the living God." At that moment, the

gospels change gear. Because it's the moment at which Jesus is recognized and named as messiah, that suddenly he starts to talk about his suffering and his passion. He moved towards Jerusalem.

This is the pivotal moment, as I say, in the gospel story. Luke relates this story to the story of Peter's recognition of Jesus by saying, "Eight days after these words were spoken." Those are the words that he's referring to. I want to draw out three phrases that occur in this gospel reading. The first is this, "They saw his glory. Peter, James, and John arose out of their slumber to see the glory of Jesus." It's worth noting, that unlike the other gospels ... I've talked about what they have in common with this story, but there's also slight differences. One big difference in Luke is that he doesn't actually use the word "transfigure." He doesn't call this a story of transfiguration. It's probably because Luke was writing in a pagan context rather than a Jewish context. He was aware that the story could have been misunderstood, because pagan stories and myths have stories of transfiguration. That's a concept known outside of the Old Testament tradition.

That's still the case. If you're not a Harry Potter fan, then this will be lost on you, what I'm about to say, but I'm about to quote Hermione Granger, someone who I've never quoted before in a sermon. I might never quote her again. But she does say something interesting on the subject of transfiguration. Hermione says this, "I'm particularly interested in transfiguration, you know. Turning something into something else, it's supposed to be very difficult." Well, the kind of transfiguration that Hermione Granger was learning about at Hogwarts is very different to the transfiguration that occurred on the mountain top that we're thinking about today. What Luke wants us to realize is that this is not a story about turning something into something else. This was a moment when Jesus stayed the same, but something very important about his identity was revealed. It's as if something was peeled back. We saw or we see deeper into the person of Jesus, not as something else, but as who he really is.

It's not Jesus becoming something else. It's about

something important about his identity being revealed. Luke doesn't say, "Jesus was transfigured." He says instead that the disciples saw him not transfigured, but in his glory. What the disciples saw was still Jesus, but they got a glimpse of his glory. Glory is the word that's unique to Luke here, and it's a word that speaks of divinity. In the Bible, all glory belongs to God. He alone is truly glorious. What the disciples are witnessing here is a glimpse of Jesus' divine nature. They are seeing the Jesus is not just from God, but of God. We can see in this story of transfiguration a visual demonstration of who Jesus is. Do you remember I said that the story comes right after Peter naming Jesus as messiah? Well, what's happening here is a continuation of that. Peter has identified Jesus as messiah, and this great story, what happens here, is that identity being confirmed in a different form.

In my favorite Christmas carol, "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing", we sing these words, "Veiled in flesh, the God Head see. Hail the incarnate deity." Well, on the mount of transfiguration, that veil is lifted and for a moment the disciples see behind the veil to who Jesus really is, to see Jesus in his glory. Now, I'm very aware that his claim is a stumbling block for many people. I often hear people say, "Well, I can cope with the idea of God, and I can see Jesus as a great teacher. I just can't imagine him as divine. I just can't get my head round that. I can't see that Jesus was anything other than a great religious teacher."

Robert Lewis Stevenson told this little story. "A ship was in a serious storm and in great distress. The passengers were alarmed. One of the passengers, against orders, went up to the deck and made his way to the pilot. The seaman was at his post of duty at the wheel, but seeing that the man was very frightened, he gave him a reassuring smile. Returning to the other passengers, the man said, 'I have seen the face of the pilot and he smiled. All is well.'" That's what the transfiguration is all about. It's the disciples getting a look, a glimpse, into the face of Jesus Christ, and seeing him for who he really is. So Paul actually spells this out. He writes in Corinthians II how God gives us the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. That is a deep and profound thought. In the person of Jesus

Christ, God has a human face.

Before moving on, I want just to finish this section with a word from C.S. Lewis. It's quite a long quote, but I think it bears repeating. It addresses the thoughts of those who struggle with the notion of God revealed in Jesus, Jesus being in any way divine. C.S. Lewis writes this, "I'm trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Jesus. That, 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God.' This is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things that Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic on a level with a man who says he is a poached egg, or else he would be the devil of hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was and is the son of God, or else a madman or something worse."

"You can shut him up for a fool. You can spit at him and kill him as a demon, or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to." Or as that paragraph has been summarized, "Jesus was either mad, bad, or God." Secondly and more briefly, another phrase I want to pick out from this gospel: Peter says to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here. It is good for us to be here." You know when you watch a TV show and you see one of those game shows and the host comes up, and the crowd is whooping and cheering and hollering and being excited? That I'm told is because they've been primed to do that, a warm up act has come on to get them up to be ready for the show. (I often wonder if that's something we should do at church. I'll be talking with Rebecca when she gets back about this.)

Because sometimes I've walked out ... This has never happened at St. James, of course, but sometimes I've walked out to lead a service, looked out at a sea of rather glum faces. I wonder to myself, "Does anyone think it is good for us to be here?" We have this great privilege of worshiping the God who has come amongst us in Jesus Christ, a God who is with us now by the power of the Holy

Spirit. It is very good for us to be here. It's not just in church that we can enjoy the company of God and know the joy that comes with that. We worship a God who travels with us. I knew of a woman who put this phrase on top of her mirror, so that every day when she started her day by brushing her teeth, she would be reminded as she looked up, "It is good for us to be here."

Finally, look at what the voice from the cloud says. "This is my son, my chosen. Listen to him." The world is so noisy it's good to be reminded of the need to be silent and listen. Listen to him. Our prayers aren't just made up of words. We can sit silently in the presence of God and open ourselves up to his transforming spirit. Prayer is not all about us seeking to change God's mind. It's about the possibility of us being changed by God.

I'll close by leaving you with some more deep and profound words from St. Paul in Corinthians II. He says this, "And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another, for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit."

Amen.