

THE SUNDAY BEFORE LENT, 2014
(Exodus 24.12-18; Matthew 17.1-9)

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.

Jesus and his friends have been in the far north of Galilee, in the region of Caesarea Philippi – in modern terms, probably somewhere in the south of Lebanon, or just over the border into Syria. Peter has identified Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the living God; and Jesus has made the first prediction of his passion, coupling this chilling prophecy with the call to his disciples to take up their cross and follow him – only those who lose their lives for his sake will find them. Then, at this moment of heightened tension and uncertainty, Jesus utters one of his most provocative statements,

Truly, I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom (Matthew 16.28).

What are we to make of those words? Some commentators have suggested that Jesus expected the new age to dawn within a very few years. He would go to the cross, yes, but his death would bring about the visible coming of God's kingdom on earth, in which Jesus would reign in triumph – and this would happen within the lifetime of some of his disciples.

There are other texts in the New Testament that can be taken to support this view. It is likely Saint Paul espoused it in some of his earlier epistles. But Jesus died on the cross and, despite his resurrection, the New Age did not dawn. If you look at the final verses of Saint John's Gospel you can feel the anxiety of the second generation of Christians when Saint John – traditionally the longest lived of the apostles, and the final human link with Jesus' earthly life – came to die:

The rumour (had) spread in the (Christian) community that this disciple would not die. Yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die but, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?" (John 21.23)

Could it be that Jesus was mistaken when he said,

"Truly, I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom"? (Matthew 16.28).

It is unfortunate that those who divided the Bible into chapters – and our present system of chapter divisions in the Bible was only agreed in the 13th century – chose to end chapter 16 of Saint Matthew's Gospel with those words about some of those standing there not seeing death before they saw the Son of Man coming in his kingdom. By doing this, they created an artificial separation between them and the first verse of chapter 17, which is their natural explanation,

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.

On the mount of the Transfiguration, Peter, James and John saw the glory of the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.

In one way – and looked at from the perspective of those who live in time and space – Peter, James, and John were looking into the future. As with all of Jesus' healings, the Transfiguration can be understood as an anticipation of the ultimate, future state, when God's Kingdom will finally have come on earth, as it already is in heaven. Here and now, without tasting death, they were privileged to have the veil lifted so that they could see Jesus as he will be in the world to come.

This is one perspective on Jesus' Transfiguration: the view from a world structured by space and time. But God does not live in space and time; for God, all places and all times are HERE and NOW. Looked at from this perspective, we have to ask ourselves whether, on the Mount of the Transfiguration, Peter, James and John were really privileged to have the veil lifted so that they could see Jesus as he *will* be in the world to come. Or, whether their eyes were simply opened, so that they could see Jesus, here and now, as he truly IS.

We live in space and time. For us it is axiomatic that if an object is here, it cannot also be there; that an event that happened last week cannot happen now as well. Time and space structure the world in which we live; we would go mad without them. But poets and mystics, as well as the pages of the Bible, point us beyond this world of time and space to the eternity of God, which is the ground of all our being.

The priest-poet, R S Thomas, captures this sense of glimpsing the transfiguring eternity of God within the constraints of time and space in his poem, *The Bright Field*,

*I have seen the sun break through
to illuminate a small field
for a while, and gone my way
and forgotten it. But that was the
pearl of great price, the one field that had
treasure in it. I realise now
that I must give all that I have
to possess it. Life is not hurrying

on to a receding future, nor hankering after
an imagined past. It is the turning
aside like Moses to the miracle
of the lit bush, to a brightness
that seemed as transitory as your youth*

once, but is the eternity that awaits you.

Next Wednesday, Lent begins. Ideally, Lent is a time when we try to stand back from 'hurrying on to a receding future', or 'hankering after an imagined past'. Instead, if we choose to make it so, Lent can be the time when we make space – even a very little space – to stop and stare, to be, to try to look at things and people, not as we need or want them to be, but as they simply *are*. If we do this, we too may get a sense of an apparently momentary brightness that can seem as transitory as our youth, but yet may be an intimation of the eternity that awaits us.

From the point of view of those who live in time and space, Jesus' Transfiguration gives us a glimpse of life in the age to come. From the point of view of God's eternity, though, which is the ground of all our being, Jesus reigns today, and our lives are – even now - held within his greater life. The challenge to us, who seek to take up our cross and follow him is, increasingly, to live from this deeper dimension of our being.