

SERMON FOR SUNDAY BEFORE LENT | 11.02.18

“Words, words, words”: of course we can’t do without them but I am sorry to say the Church does seem to like using some of the most complicated ones - and today’s special word ‘Transfiguration’ is no exception!

So let’s start by seeing how many words we can recall that start with the words ‘trans’ - transaction, transatlantic, transcendental, transcribe, transcript, transect, transept, transfer, transformation, transient, transistor, transitory, translate, translucent, transmigration, transmission, transom, transparent, transplant, transport, transubstantiation, transverse...

All good words which all have the prefix meaning, across, beyond, going to another side of, going into another state or place.

But in the street, if I used the word ‘trans’, everyone would instantly know what I meant, trans being the short form as in transgender or transsexual. And alongside that is another ‘trans’ word – transitioning: the long and difficult process of changing from one gender to another.

I start with this high profile word/image because it makes a really important point: experience tells us that it is possible for someone to become ‘totally different’.

Not, however, like an actor playing a part on the stage. We have all seen brilliant performers on a stage – fully engaged with the role that someone is playing. Somehow people like Benedict Cumberbatch or Meryl Streep stop being themselves in front of an audience or a film camera; we get caught up with the plot and forget who they are for the time they are on set: and then again we see them afterwards as they really are and the illusion disappears again.

But acting is not, to use that phrase again, ‘transitioning’. For those who go through gender reorientation, there is (except in the most extreme circumstances) ‘no way back’. They move from one state of being to another, from all that is ‘male’ to ‘female’, female to male. They have, as the dictionary says, ‘gone across’, beyond, gone to another side of, gone into another state or place.

So when Jesus stands on the mountain in front of his closest and dearest friends Peter, James and John – the Church has to find a big

'trans' word to express what was actually happening. This wasn't just a few bright lights shining up from the rocks in front of him, giving him the appearance of a film-star. The arrival of Moses and Elijah weren't just computer generated graphics being played out on the hillside, complete with a John Williams filmscore. Transfiguration is the only word that will do to express something much, much deeper.

And it's all to do with religious experience.

Let's go back a bit. This story comes about half way through St Mark's Gospel and, significantly after the penny has dropped for Peter and he has been able to say that Jesus is the Christ. It is the turning point for the whole of Mark's version of the Gospel story.

Jesus and the three apostles were in the busy garrison city of Caesarea Philippi on the coast and he has been talking about not only his own death but the need of his disciples to be willing to die too. *If any would come after me, they must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever will save their life will lose it. But whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.* It had been a tough day and I am sure they all felt a bit shell shocked.

So what does he do next: take them out for a meal, find a bar or a local entertainment joint? No. He gives them a *trans* experience, something that enables them to feel the reality of who he was. What he offered them was a vision (and that is a pretty tired and feeble word for what Jesus gave but it is the only one we have available) of himself as the incarnate Son of God. This was how Jesus was – and indeed is – when in heaven. For us he had been born into this world in human flesh and blood. But his real status, his real personhood, was this majestic figure in dazzling white who talked and walked with the great prophets of the past, Elijah and Moses. Jesus wasn't reaching for the grease-paint, putting on special clothes or playing a role: here was the real McCoy – just for a few minutes: here they saw Jesus, Jesus the Son of God.

And the disciples knew it was real, especially after they heard the voice: *This is my beloved Son, listen to him.*

And then the experience vanished with Peter twittering on about building little temples or booths to keep the event permanent. He had understood some of what Jesus was getting at but this last bit he got completely wrong. Within minutes there was Jesus – in the same old

tunic as before. Like Cinderella, there was a time for glory - and a time to go back to normal.

And there is the rub.

As for the Apostles, so for us, how can we bottle that glory? How can we keep alive the *trans* experience that Jesus gave to his friends?

Because, for sure, much of what we do in our churches inevitably lacks the ‘wow’ factor. Here we are, gathered in the same building, with the same people, the same words, the same music and the same routines. Is it any wonder that people come for a while and the stop coming: we’ve done that and got the tee-shirt.

If we believe that our purpose here is to feed the aspirations of ‘spirituality junkies’, needing signs and wonders week by week, then we are clearly going to fail. There are churches which attempt to do that and they disappoint far more people than they satisfy: of course they do. Jesus doesn’t provide healing miracles or happy, warm sensations at the touch of a button. It doesn’t work that way.

As St Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans: instead be transformed by the renewal of your minds... OK. How?

By seeing how many *trans* (in the sense of transforming) experiences there are in and around the worlds we live in. Look at the work of both individual Christians and Christian groups and churches - in tackling poverty in our estates and inner cities; raising standards of education and health care; challenging corruption and the effects of payday loans; raising issues relating to migrants and modern day slavery, at home and abroad; coordinating international disaster relief and caring for the needs of refugees; challenging bad economics, bad ecological science and campaigning for political prisoners, victims of sexual abuse and the end to nuclear weapons.

Of course this is work being done by non-Christian too. But as Angus Ritchie has pointed out, what motivates us is not just doing good for its own sake but as a way of revealing the God who shares with us his own trans-forming power and ability to bring about the changes that need to be made.

Because, ultimately, each of us are both too self-absorbed and too lazy to achieve the radical changes that need to be made – both to our lifestyles and to the world in which we live. We get bored or we get side-tracked and we move on to other things.

So in this wonderful vision of the *Trans-figuration*, Jesus on the mountain with the Elijah and Moses, we get a timely reminder that God is not expecting us to do good things on our own – as if we could.

Instead he wants to show us how what Jesus did – trans-itioning from human form to the radiant Son of his Father - is the journey that we are embarked on too. The open invitation is for us to trans-ition from a preoccupation with the earthly to a new focus on the heavenly so that, as St Paul puts it, *God's light can shine out of our darkness. By shining in our hearts he will reveal, through us, the true glory of God to all the world.*

Going to Mass might not seem that earth shattering and sometime we wish it was just a bit more exciting! But this isn't an act or a theatrical performance: it is here that, every so often, we get to see the glory of God as he really is - just like the vision enjoyed by Peter, James and John. God knows we need encouragement every so often and he offers us that more than we realise!

The exciting thing is that, little by little, we find that the process is a very real one: that love and commitment to what God is doing is enabling us to *trans-ition*, changing more and more into the likeness of Jesus. We may not be dazzling white yet, but God-at-work-in-us does show!

And for that we have to be eternally grateful!