

Transfiguration : the Way of the Cross confirmed (Mark 9: 1-13)

9¹And he said to them, 'Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.'

The Transfiguration

2 Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, ³and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. ⁴And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. ⁵Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.'⁶He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!' ⁸Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

The Coming of Elijah

9 As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. ¹⁰So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead could mean. ¹¹Then they asked him, 'Why do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?' ¹²He said to them, 'Elijah is indeed coming first to restore all things. How then is it written about the Son of Man, that he is to go through many sufferings and be treated with contempt? ¹³But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written about him.'

(Translation © Lawrence Moore, *Mark for Missional Disciples*, Walking the Walk Publications, 2018)

The Transfiguration

Who'd be a disciple – particularly of a bloke who is saying, “Listen carefully. There’s no way around this one: this whole thing is going to go belly-up. However good it’s looked up until now, get one thing absolutely clear: I’m going to certain extreme suffering, rejection and death. Now, who’s coming with me?” What *is* surprising is that the disciples – the new community – *are* up for following Jesus! They don’t say, “Sorry Jesus, but this isn’t what we signed up for! It’s been great and all that, but you’re on your own from here!” Instead, they keep on with Jesus – and try to impose their own terms on what following means. Their strategy is collective resistance. *They* decide to take control of *Jesus*. They will follow Jesus, but Jesus will

bloomin' well follow *their* roadmap! And so this crucial mid-point of Mark's narrative opens up a second narrative cycle – the struggle between Jesus and his disciples over which “way” they are going: the way of triumph or the way of the cross. And the clearer the path ahead to suffering becomes, the more fiercely the disciples resist.

There are 4 instances of blatant misunderstanding:

1. Peter refuses to accept Jesus' political fate (8: 31-3)
2. Peter misinterprets the transfiguration vision (9: 5-7)
3. The disciples discuss who will be greatest among them (9: 33ff)
4. James and John try to secure the highest rank (10: 35ff)

The controlling text is Mark 8: 34-5. To those who already assume they are followers, Jesus says, “Oh no you're not – necessarily. You have to *become* my followers by the only way possible: deny yourselves, take up your cross, and follow me to suffering, rejection and death. Either you lose your life for my sake, and find it, or you try and avoid that, and lose it. There's no other way!” The disciples are determined that there *is* another way, with a happy ending. So we see in this section the wilful blindness and deafness of the disciples to the way of the cross, emphasised in the narrative by Jesus healing two blind men and two deaf and dumb people.

At this crucial point in the narrative, we have the second “apocalyptic moment” – the transfiguration. Like the baptism (the first moment), the heavenly voice confirms that it is *Jesus' way* that is the right way, and that the things the disciples find hardest to hear are precisely the things they *must* hear. It couldn't be clearer: “This is my Son, the Beloved! Now *listen* to him!” Listen to precisely *what*, though? Listen to the call to follow. And be prepared to accept the terms, because there's no room for negotiation.

The shadow of the cross hangs over the narrative. And it is the *cross*, not the resurrection, which is emphasised here on the mountain. Bultmann and others have interpreted the transfiguration as a prefiguring of the resurrection – a resurrection story inserted here into the narrative because the risen Jesus doesn't appear anywhere else in the gospel (other than in the longer, later ending). But this sort of exegesis does *precisely* what the disciples want to do – to look for a triumphalist, “happy ending” escape from the cross! In this case, it's an escape that goes, “Yes, the cross is a terrible tragedy, but don't worry, because, after all, there's resurrection, so it wasn't *really* that bad after all, was it?” We need to realise something important – we who already know how the whole thing ends ... and then begins again! *The resurrection doesn't dilute the horror and evil of the cross!* Mark cannot emphasise this too strongly. Jesus predicts suffering, rejection, death and resurrection – but the resurrection is no comfort to him! He dies, screaming in bewilderment, “My God! Why have you abandoned me????” Hardly the cry of someone who knows he just has to hang on till Sunday and it will all be okay ...

Secondly, it is clear that, as far as the disciples are concerned, Jesus may as well have been speaking Martian when he talked about the resurrection! Look at Mark 9:9. Jesus tells them not to speak about what they see on the mountain *until they understand the meaning of the resurrection!* The gospel ends with the disciples in fear and trembling, wondering what on earth it means. But it is not only the disciples who have to learn its meaning: *Jesus does too!* If not, he would not have died in bewildered despair!

So how is the *cross* present on this mountain? Firstly, it is present because of the white robes Jesus wears. These are not so much resurrection robes as the robes of martyrs. Mark, you will recall, has Jesus evoke the image of the Danielic Son of Man – the Human One. The scene in chapter 7 is the judgement throne. The Ancient of Days is dressed in robes as white as snow. The context is the apocalyptic judgement of the kingdoms. Yahweh is sovereign. Yahweh gives dominion to the Son of Man in a kingdom that is to prevail over the lesser, arrogant human kingdoms. White robes in apocalyptic literature are symbolic of power – but also of sacrifice and martyrdom.

So what is happening on the mountain? Mark evokes the Danielic image through the white robes and the description of the terror the vision induces to do two things. Firstly, the truth is that the kingdom Jesus has preached as having drawn near in his person and ministry is the kingdom of God. Jesus, Mark tells us, is the one to whom God has given dominion. But secondly, the thing that the disciples are to listen to is what Jesus tells them about the way of the cross. This kingdom can only be established through his suffering and death. Remember the conditions for following? (1) Deny yourself (2) Take up your cross (3) Follow.

The setting for this three-fold demand is not some inward spiritual asceticism. It's not about giving up chocolate, coping with a difficult boss and attending church! The context is *the court room*. This is written in the context of a Christian community under persecution. When you're in the dock, Jesus says, you have two choices: deny me, and save your life. Or confess me, denying yourself, and lose your life – and save it in the process! Follow me. That is what I am facing. If you want to follow me, face it too. Indeed, "take up your cross" was probably the recruiting slogan for some Jewish extremist organisations who carried out attacks against the Romans, knowing fully that they were likely to be caught and crucified!

Yet how does losing one's life for the sake of Christ save it? Mark is invoking the Danielic Son of Man in a double-edged manner. Jesus is the one to whom dominion has been given in the court of heaven. In the earthly court, however, Jesus will be in the dock. There is an irony: because Jesus is the one to whom ultimate dominion has been given, he is the one to whom all must give account. Those who threaten death to Jesus and his followers will be powerless – because Jesus and his followers are challenging and smashing their ultimate power. Their ultimate power is the power to kill. They use the threat of death to demand and obtain conformity and co-operation. Their kingdoms are built upon death. And Jesus intends to resist – and accept the penalty! He will not bow the knee, or make the compromise, or take the bribe, or back down in fear. Jesus is resisting the powers. Resisting the powers of our day is what it means to follow this Jesus.

The second sense in which the cross is present is through the presence of Elijah. The gospel writers all clearly understand John the Baptist as an Elijah figure. Note how, immediately at the conclusion of the episode, the disciples ask about Elijah's coming (v11). This is part of the resistance to the way of the cross: if Elijah is still to come, then this cannot be "the end" as Jesus supposes. Jesus says in response, referring to John, "Elijah *has* come – and they killed him! He and I are part of the same mission. It is *necessary* for the Son of Man to suffer because that is the fate of the prophets!"

In other words, the Transfiguration is different from what most of us have been brought up to believe since we coloured in our first picture of the event in Sunday School. This is not a moment of glory, or of hope. It is confirmation of the second great cycle in Mark's narrative: the way of the cross. The way of the cross is about engagement with the powers of the day. It will bring about suffering and death. It is the *only* way – for Jesus and for would-be followers. The Transfiguration confirms the call to suffering discipleship issued in 8:34f. The divine voice underscores it: "This is my beloved Son. Listen to what he tells you!"

It also continues the story of the disciples' resistance to Jesus and their attempts to control him. Look how Peter addresses him in v5. "Rabbi". He abandons the language of Messiah in favour of "Rabbi". This is astonishing in itself. He has just witnessed something incredible happening to Jesus, and his response is to *downgrade* his language! This is presumably part of Mark's strategy to ensure we don't get the wrong end of the story and tell it as a "glory story" (sorry, Bultmann!). But significantly, this is the term used by the disciples at two other key points in the gospel when they side *with* the dominant Jewish ideology over *against* Jesus: when the disciples argue with Jesus over his repudiation over the temple (11:21) and Judas' greeting at the point of betrayal (14:45). Here Peter responds, not by listening, not by following, but by proposing a cult of adulation – part of the triumphalist, Messiah-shaped spirituality and expectation that Jesus is explicitly disavowing!

We should note that the presence of Moses and Elijah do two other things. As well as evoking the Daniel 7 courtroom myth, Mark also evokes the Sinai narrative. The Transfiguration is a mini salvation-history summit! The Transfiguration establishes something that Jesus claims repeatedly: what he is doing is in line with “the Law and the Prophets”. Moses is the greatest of the prophets – the prophet who gave the people the Law. Elijah (and then Elisha after him, as we see in today’s reading) is the prophet who ministers so authoritatively in the power of the Spirit. Jesus combines both.

Secondly, both these prophets experienced Yahweh’s epiphany on a mountain top at crucial points in their mission when they were discouraged. In other words, Mark is telling us, they are here to encourage Jesus – because Jesus knows what he is setting out to confront, and his own disciples want none of it! The Transfiguration is there for the sake of Jesus – to confirm him and encourage him, and to get through to the disciples: “Listen, I know you don’t like what he’s saying, but he’s my Son. Listen to him! *Stop* trying to undermine him!”

Going deeper into the text (Mark 9: 1-13)

Perhaps we can remember times when someone we knew or loved was experiencing life intensely, so joyously, that a kind of light radiated from their face and eyes. This is a pale analogy of what Mark is trying to describe in this story of transfiguration. In rare moments the glory of the new creation breaks in upon human life, as visible as sun beams that gradually pierce a cloud bank until more and more light stream through, a *kairos* moment.

But what is it all about and what does it have to do with us? Is this just more mysticism that we can never experience ourselves? So much of contemporary spirituality is divorced from community and from the struggle of history. Transfiguration moments happen when our stories become joined in their deepest

core to the gospel story. From the mount of Transfiguration, the divine voice asks us again to listen. When we take seriously this discipleship journey, when we live a radical faithfulness, our stories begin to merge into a great Story like little drops of water that become brooks, then streams and rivers, and finally rush into the ocean.. We experience glory when we are given the grace to know that our story is inextricably related to that greater Story.

We are not alone but surrounded by a cloud of witnesses. Not just Elijah and Moses but all the apostles accompany us on this journey: Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day, Steve Biko, Archbishop Romero and everyone who has tried to be faithful to the gospel.

Take the opportunity to name some person of faith who for you is a part of the cloud of witnesses.

Describe the qualities of faith and life that make that person so significant for you. Have a dialogue with that person.

Mark story takes us from the 'Transfiguration "high" on the mountaintop into the low valley of the scene portrayed in Mark 9:14-29. As we come down the mountain with Jesus we enter a chaotic scene of conflict and controversy in which the disciples have been unable to cast out a demon that endangers a young child. Each of us as Christian can probably tell a similar story of time when we experienced failure and defeat. What has happened when we have confronted evil or tried to solve a problem, and our best efforts have been met with defeat and failure? There is a kind of action-reflection process that is modeled by Jesus and his community. Some of us by nature may find it difficult to reflect on anything before we are off to the next action or project. Others of us never seem to have enough information before we are ready to act.

On going evaluation is one of the most important spiritual disciplines of a faith community.. The experience of failure can be a key moment for learning

perseverance, for deepening our awareness of root causes, or for developing more effective strategies.

At an even deeper level, the text calls us to struggle with our own demons of unbelief because we cannot exorcise that by which we are still possessed. In your discipleship journey, name our addictions; confess the self-interest of your privileges. Perhaps that naming will mean that we must honestly confess our powerlessness to change.

The most genuine expression of prayer is found in the father's heartfelt cry to compassion. "I believe! Help me in my unbelief"

For Mark, unbelief is not incorrect doctrine or an imperfect attitude. For Mark, unbelief is the despair that is dictated to us by the powers and principalities of this world. Unbelief is a life script that is fixed and says to us that nothing can really change. When Jesus asks us to deepen our prayer life in order to follow him, he is calling us to develop a spirituality of social action.

Liturgies and hymns (Mark 9: 1-13)

Here is a collection of resources that might be woven into your normal Palm Sunday service.

Palm Sunday



We pray for the Church around the world: as we enter Holy Week, may the passion, death and resurrection of Christ inspire us to transform our world.

Lord, in your mercy...

Cafod

Opening Prayer

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout, daughter of Jerusalem!

See, your king comes to you; righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

(Zechariah 9:9)

As the people spread their coats palm branches on the ground to welcome Jesus into Jerusalem, so we welcome him into our lives this morning. King of Glory, King of Peace, Servant King, reign in our hearts and lives this day and all days, that we might praise your holy name.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord

ALL: Hosanna in the highest

A Psalm

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever.

ALL: Let Israel say: "His love endures forever."

The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone;

ALL: The LORD has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes.

This is the day the LORD has made;

ALL: let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD.

ALL: From the house of the LORD we bless you

The LORD is God and he has made his light shine upon us.

ALL: With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession up to the altar.

You are my God, and I will give you thanks you are my God, and I will exalt you.

ALL: Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever.

(words from Psalm 118)

Read more

at: http://www.faithandworship.com/liturgy_Palm_Sunday.htm#ixzz57GTqTG52

Reading - Luke 19:28-40 - The Triumphal Entry

Christ Jesus, you came that we might have life, and have it abundantly

ALL: Precious Jesus, we offer you our praise and thanks.

You poured living water into lives that were parched and thirsty

ALL: Precious Jesus, we offer you our praise and thanks.

You fed souls that were hungry with the bread of life

ALL: Precious Jesus, we offer you our praise and thanks.

You brought healing through a touch that knew no prejudice or barrier

ALL: Precious Jesus, we offer you our praise and thanks.

You brought Salvation through the cross,

ALL: Precious Jesus, we offer you our praise and thanks.

Often Palm Sunday is a family service, so here is a website that offers some interesting craft ideas for Palm Sunday

<http://www.dltk-bible.com/crafts/mpalm.htm>

and a sketch that needs little preparation but does not need an extrovert to pull it off!! It's a clever idea and you could change the sketch if you wish to fit the theme or emphasis you wish to make:

The Donkey's Story

Donkey and translator enter, donkey eagerly leading the way...

Translator: (apologetically) We don't usually bring animals to church with us, but this donkey insisted on coming with me today. He says he has quite a tale to tell us.

Donkey: Haw He Haw (Try to give inflections of excitement in voice.)

Translator: The donkey says, "Wow! What a day I've had today!" (turning to donkey) Won't you please tell us about it?

Donkey: (Bray trying to give inflections of fear.)

Translator: The donkey says, It started when two strange guys came and took me

away. I'm a young donkey and have never been away from home.

Donkey: (Bray: curiosity)

Translator: The donkey says, These guys led me outside the city where I met a man who was different from any man I've ever met. He had the kindest eyes I've ever seen. And they looked sad too.

By the way, do you have a name, Donkey?

Donkey: (Bray: brief – matter of fact)

Translator: The donkey says we can call him Jake. Do you have more to tell us?

Donkey: (Bray: fear followed by wonder of wonders & peace)

Translator: Jake says, The two strangers helped this kind man to sit on my back. Nobody has ever ridden on my back before, so I started to jump around and toss him right off. But this man was different. I felt peaceful, and I just wanted to do whatever he wanted.

Donkey: (Bray: excitement)

Translator: Jake says, he headed me along the main road into the city, and soon there were people everywhere. Everyone was shouting "Hosanna" and "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" It was like this guy was a king on the way to being crowned. I wondered if this could be the Messiah?

Donkey: (Bray: wonder, distant recollections)

Translator: Jake says, Then it came to me... Messiah! Yes! Didn't I remember my mother telling me about something that happened to her grandfather long ago? Mama said her mama told her about it. Jake thinks that a donkey carried the Messiah's mother to Bethlehem the very night he was born. She said the donkey told about seeing the baby Jesus being born. And then there were shepherds who came and told about angels on the hillside to tell them about baby Jesus.

Donkey: (Bray: awe)

Translator: Jake says, "Wow! He chose just a little donkey like me to ride! But it couldn't be, could it? I mean, I'm just a plain ole donkey. Shouldn't a king be riding a great stallion?"

Donkey: (Bray: as if praying)

Translator: Jake says we should pray... Our Heavenly Father, we thank you for coming to us and for showing us your love. Bless these children and draw them

closer to you every day.

Donkey: (Bray: motioning with head to invite to follow and praise Jesus)

Translator: Jake says we can praise Jesus just like the people did on the road to Jerusalem. Let's shout "Hosanna" and praise Jesus too! (Give each child a palm leaf and lead them around the church saying "Hosanna" and "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!")

(The Creation, a Bible storybook for children by Janice D. Gree)

To finish, there is a collection of picture and prayers that I discovered on the Faith and Life website that I would recommend you check it out .

May our worship be filled
not only with the singing
of hymns, psalms and song
but with a melody of love
that wells up in our hearts
until it begins to pour out,
as with Mary's precious oil,
and spread its sweet perfume
not only within these walls
but in the streets outside
and in the places where we live

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Lord, teach us to be good neighbours,
not just to the folk who live nearby
but to everyone that we meet;
to see the best in, and want the best
for all your precious children,
who might return once more
to their Father's house
and the warmth of your embrace.

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Loving Father,
all the fancy words
in the world,
expressed in eloquent prose,
decorated with emotion,
spoken with conviction,
cannot compete with a heartfelt
'sorry'
when all other words fail.

There are times
when we are all too aware
of our limitations,
conscious of sin
and the distance it creates between us.
Sometimes 'sorry'
is all the heart can bear to say aloud.
It is only you
who can read and understand
the language of our hearts.
Only you who can translate our 'sorry'
into the prayer we would have prayed,
if we had the words within us.
Then you forgive,
and having forgiven,
surround us in an embrace of love,
drawing us close to your heart,
as it was always meant to be.
Thank you, Loving Father,
that you listen to hearts
as well as voices.
Thank you.

Read more at:

http://www.faithandworship.com/healing_prayers.htm#ixzz57GTPZYGy

For those weighed down by ill health,
bring wholeness to body, mind and spirit.
For those weighed down by worry,
bring wisdom, peace and reassurance.
For those weighed down by fear,
bring freedom, release and liberation.

For those weighed down by sadness,
bring comfort, strength and joy.
For all whose hearts are troubled
at the start of this new day,
be the voice that they hear,
the warmth that they feel,
the wisdom they seek,
the strength they require,
and the one in whose arms they rest.

Read more

at: http://www.faithandworship.com/healing_prayers.htm#ixzz57GTxl2X

I bring to you my body,
muscle and sinew,
artery and vein.
bone and joint,
the miracle that is me.
I bring to you my brokenness,
and ask for healing,
restoration,
freedom to be
the person I could b

Read more

at: http://www.faithandworship.com/healing_prayers.htm#ixzz57GThtuUP

Read more

at: http://www.faithandworship.com/liturgy_Palm_Sunday.htm#ixzz57GTz0oFq

May God the Father
prepare your journey,

Jesus the Son
guide your footsteps,
The Spirit of Life
strengthen your body,
The Three in One
watch over you,
on every road
that you may follow.

Read more

at: http://www.faithandworship.com/blessings_and_benedictions.html#ixzz57GUL2W30

May the peace of God reign in this place
and the love of God forever hold you tight,
May the Spirit of God flow through your life
and the joy of God uphold you day and night.

Read more

at: http://www.faithandworship.com/blessings_and_benedictions.html#ixzz57GUTnlHf

May the beauty of God
be reflected in your eyes,
the love of God
be reflected in your hands,
the wisdom of God
be reflected in your words,
and the knowledge of God
flow from your heart,
that all might see,

and seeing, believe

Read more at:

http://www.faithandworship.com/blessings_and_benedictions.html#ixzz57GUZg5lx

Remind us often Lord,
when we are feeling
proud,
arrogant,
beyond reproach,
pleased with ourselves,
self sufficient in our ways,
that for such as us
and better
and worse
you walked a road
that took you to a cruel cross,
and rose again to show us where
we might look for rescue
as from this lofty perch
we fall.

Read more at: http://www.faithandworship.com/prayers_Lent.htm#ixzz57GUqv8eq

Forgive those things we have done
which have caused you sadness,
and those things we should have done
that would have brought you joy.
In both we have failed
ourselves,
and you.
Bring us back to that place

where our journey began,
when we said that we would follow
the way that you first trod.

Lead us to the Cross
and meet
us there.

Read more at: http://www.faithandworship.com/prayers_Lent.htm#ixzz57GUyBZIW