

## 14<sup>th</sup> February 2021 – Transfiguration – Hugh's Sermon

In The name of Our Creator, The Son Our Saviour and Redeemer  
And The Triune Spirit Who is With Us Always;

### NOTES

#### Listen to Him

There's a well-known story about a man who fell off a cliff. On the way down he managed to grab a branch, and there he was, suspended a thousand feet above a gorge, with only the branch preserving him from certain death. He cried out, "Help! Help! Is there anyone there?"

A deep voice replied, "Yes". The man looked around, couldn't see anyone, and said, "Who is this?" The voice replied, "This is God". After a moment, the man asked, "Can you help me?" "Yes" God replied; "Let go of the branch". The man was silent for a minute, and then he called out, "Is there anyone else there?"

When God asks us to do difficult things it's natural for us to call out, "Is there anyone else there?"

We can second-guess ourselves, wondering if it's really the voice of God we've heard, or wondering if we're interpreting the Scriptures in the right way. Sometimes we're right to wonder; we're not always very good at discerning exactly what it is that God is asking of us, and it's good to check and be sure. But there are other times when indeed we will know what's right; we just don't want to face it, because it's too costly.

As mentioned in today's reading, Peter, James, and John, were genuinely confused about whether Jesus was truly speaking the word of God to them, or whether they just didn't want to accept what he said because it was too costly. But there's no doubt that they had recently heard a very hard message from Jesus, and in the first sentence of today's gospel, Mark directs us back to that hard message. We read, 'Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves' (Mark 9:2). Mark very rarely gives us time references in his gospel, and so when he does, we can be sure they're significant. So the first question we should ask ourselves is 'six days after what?'

So this is the background to today's passage. Can you imagine the confusion in the minds of the disciples? They've gradually come to understand that Jesus is more than just a wise human teacher or a prophet; he's the Messiah the Son of the living God. But now he seems to them to be taking a disastrous course. How could he be the Messiah if he was going to be killed by his enemies? It couldn't possibly be true. But if he was the Messiah, could he be wrong about this? Maybe he wasn't the Messiah after all?

So now Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up a high mountain—probably Mount Hermon, which is close to Caesarea Philippi. Going up a mountain was full of Old Testament resonances; Moses had gone up Mount Sinai to receive law from God, and when he came down again his face was shining so brightly that the people were terrified and asked him to put on a veil so that they wouldn't have to look at him. Elijah, too, had made a long journey into the Sinai desert to the same mountain to meet there with God. As people travelled THROUGH the desert to the promised land, we read that he travelled with them as 'a pillar of CLOUD by day and a pillar of fire by night': Now the cloud comes down over the three FIGURES, including the one that looks like a pillar of fire, and they hear a voice from the CLOUD saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" And then the cloud fades away, and the disciples see that Moses and Elijah are gone, and only Jesus is there with them.

So what did these three disciples get OUT of this amazing experience? And what is Mark trying to tell his readers?

Let me give you a little sidebar here. The evidence seems to indicate that Mark wrote his gospel in Rome, in the mid-sixties of the first century. During that time Nero was the emperor, and he was the one who LAUNCHED the first great PERSECUTION of Christians. It happened after the great fire of Rome; the rumour went around that Nero had started the fire for

his own AMUSEMENT, and he needed a convenient scapegoat so he blamed the Christians. You know those Christians", he said; "They're always telling us that the world is going to end in fire! They're the ones who did it!" And so began a horrendous experience for the church in Rome.

Christians were hung on poles, covered in pitch and set on fire as torches to light Nero's processions. They were crucified, as Jesus had been CRUCIFIED. They were thrown into the arena to be torn apart by lions. It seems likely that "Peter and PAUL both died in this persecution.

Mark wrote his gospel in the context of this first great TRIBULATION that the church went through. Part of his job in writing the story of Jesus may have been to make sense of what the Christians were going through. We can be sure that now, as JESUS and his three disciples were standing on the MOUNTAIN, we read that JESUS' appearance was transformed, or transfigured, before them: his-clothes, like Moses' face, became dazzling bright – Mark adds the little detail that it was 'brighter than any LAUNDRY YOU can imagine COULD ever bleach them!' And SUDDENLY Moses and Elijah appeared there, talking with JESUS.

The disciples, of COURSE, were terrified, as YOU WOULD be if YOU SAW a friend of YOURS SUDDENLY transformed into a FIGURE of dazzling light and talking with two people YOU knew to be dead! Peter BLURTED OUT the first thing that came into his mind: "Rabbi, it's good for us to be here; let's make three dwellings, one for YOU, one for Moses, and one for Elijah!" Mark comments that 'he didn't know what he was saying'.

And then comes another Old Testament resonance. In the story of Moses going UP the MOUNTAIN to meet God, God himself came down on the MOUNTAIN in a CLOUD; later, when Elijah represented the Law and the Prophets', which was a phrase sometimes USED in the gospels to mean 'The SCRIPTURES' – the Old Testament scriptures, that is.

So here we have the two revered FIGURES, who together represent Israel's SCRIPTURES, standing there with Jesus. Now, these disciples loved their Master, BUT I'm pretty SURE that UNTIL now it had never entered their mind that he COULD possibly be greater than Moses and Elijah and the scriptures they represented. To PUT it another way, they WOULD not have expected the voice from heaven to say, 'This is my Beloved Son; listen to him', BUT rather, 'Here are the Law and the Prophets; listen to them!' 'Listen to him'. The one who speaks to US is not JUST another HUMAN RELIGIOUS teacher on the same level as Moses or Elijah. He is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. PAUL says in OUR first reading that he is 'the image of God'. And this Son of God speaks to us and calls us to the way of the Cross. "No", he says, "I'm not calling YOU to be CONQUERING heroes. In fact, many of YOU are going to lose YOUR lives. I overcame hatred with love, and I'm calling YOU to do the same thing. BUT don't imagine that YOU'LL be the loser in this; YOU WON'T. Whoever loses their life for my sake and the gospel will save it forever".

Now when YOU hear this, YOU might feel a bit like the man hanging on for dear life, hearing the voice of God saying, "Let go of the branch!" We may think that JESUS is OUT of his mind, calling US to take UP OUR cross and follow him. BUT God tells US that JESUS is not OUT of his mind. "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"

Let's pray that the Holy Spirit will help US to TRULY listen, and to PUT into practice what we hear.