

Sunday Sermon - 14.02.21
Delivered by Rev'd Selina McMahon
Year B Last after Epiphany - The Transfiguration

2 Kings 2: 1-12

Psalm 50: 1-6

2 Corinthians 4: 3-12

Mark 9: 2-9

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I've never tried cheese rolling in Gloucester, but many people have. Each year a 5 kg cheese is rolled down a hill and hundreds of people run after it, trying to beat it to the bottom. It's a horrifically dangerous event since the hill is on a sixty degree slope. Cuts and bruises are common from people who fall. Broken limbs are not rare. Neither have I tried bog snorkelling, which takes place in Wales, and which is exactly what it sounds like. However, I have been to a proper Burns night Supper and toasted the haggis. These odd British customs all take place for one reason - it's tradition.

Tradition is a powerful thing. Each nation has its own traditions. Schoolies, for example, are an Australian one - we have nothing like it in Britain. There's nothing wrong with tradition. It's a form of comfort. We know what we are doing because we've always done it like that. It lies at the root of the phrase, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do".

St Peter was brought up with the usual Jewish customs many of which went back to the time of Moses. One custom was to celebrate the feast of Tabernacles. Tabernacle is an old-fashioned word for tent, so on that night they would celebrate and then sleep in a tent., in the open air or on the roof of the house. It hearkens back to the days of the Exodus, when God led the Israelites in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire at night. They couldn't travel 24/7 so Moses made a tent called the tent of meeting outside of the camp, so that people could go there to say their prayers. It was a visible sign that an invisible God was present. When the time came to move, they packed up the tent and took it to the next campsite. It became a sign that God is always with us but also on the move.

When Jesus arrived at the mountain top his figure changed and the outside of him, which had been ordinary and like us, shone as if he was not like one of us. Jesus shone with the glory that caused Moses to shine that day on the mountain of Sinai, when the holy law from heaven came down. He shone with the glory that carried Elijah up to heaven's height – gone from this world - but alive in the next. He shone with the glory of his own baptismal day, when his Father's voice from above was heard to say: "This is my Son, the beloved, in whom I am well pleased" - and those words first uttered at the River are repeated on the Mountain Top.

Now, mountain tops are normally devoid of accommodation. Perhaps, then, Peter had the feast of Tabernacles in mind when he suggested erecting three tents, so that the moment could be prolonged. That way, he would know where Jesus and the lawgiver and the prophet would be when he needed them. Peter wanted to capture religions: to trap it in a tent.

But you can't do that because it is always changing.

The Romans had another saying, "Times change and we change with them". It's true that our traditions give us stability, but we should resist the urge to cling on to them at the exclusion of new ideas. It's true that the foundations of the gospel message are unchanging but the words we use to express them DO change as a result of changes in attitudes of society along with the metaphors and vocabulary we use to describe them.

Now I am not saying that we should get rid of the past altogether – I'm not advocating throwing away the beauty of our liturgy, but we do need to be flexible and explore new ideas and new ways of doing things. God isn't static but is constantly on the move. God leads us to new experiences, new challenges and new opportunities to love our neighbours and spread the good news of God's love.

As unlikely as it seems, the scripture tells in many places that to be like Jesus is our destiny; that the intention of God in his calling of us is to make us like him. We are destined for glory – a glory like his – a glory that will make us shine as he shone.

But first – as with Jesus – there is cross to bear. And so – each year, just before Lent, we climb the mountain of Transfiguration with him. We climb because there is a rough road ahead of us. We climb to share the vision that Peter and James and John beheld, and to be strengthened by it for our return to the lowlands and for the days before we receive the fullness of the glory that Jesus gives to us through his death and his resurrection.

The glimpse that we are granted of Christ's glory on the holy mountain is the foretaste of heaven; the image of humanity as God intended us to be in creation. We remember this glory of God that calls to us. The mountain of Transfiguration reminds us that though Jesus walked in the way of the cross, he also rose from the dead in the glory of the Father.

In the name of the Father...