

# The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

## Fr Peter's Homily for The Feast of The Transfiguration (Year A) 6<sup>th</sup> August 2023

Mount Tabor, the traditional location for the Transfiguration is a proper mountain. When the Gospel says that Jesus took Peter, James and John up a high mountain, it means what it says. Its 575 metres high – there is nothing that high in the South of England or the Midlands. So going up was a serious business, not a simple afternoon stroll. No wonder they were alone on the top! Mountains are, traditionally, the places where you go to encounter God, and that is just what happens here. The summit is filled with glory and cloud, and the voice of the Father booms forth – it is not unlike Moses' meeting with God to receive the Ten Commandments.

But this climbing the mountain to meet God is not something confined to the past. It is precisely because of this ancient tradition that, each day, the priest climbs the mountain to the altar of God. This is most obvious for us in our church in Midhurst, where there is a (very small) mountain in the middle of the sanctuary. This is not really about visibility, it is deeply symbolic. This is the mountain up which the priest leads us, as Jesus took the three disciples, so that we can come into the presence of God and meet him. Later on the priest will come down the mountain again and lead us back into the ordinary world, but we mustn't lose sight of this fact, that in every Mass we re-enact the mountain climb to the presence of the divine. What we experience there will help to form the people we are as we come back down.

Up on the mountain, the three disciples catch a glimpse of Jesus as he really is. They see behind the physical appearance to the reality that lies beneath. This is pretty amazing stuff: there is glory, and light, and noise; there is Moses, standing for the ancient Law; there is Elijah, standing for the ancient prophets. It is so entrancing that Peter wants to build shelters for them all, so that it might last longer. But then the reality of it all overwhelms them (just as the saints have sometimes been overwhelmed by the hidden realities of Holy Mass) and they fall to their feet and hide their face. It's all too much. They are terrified. The voice of the Father, pure and unmediated, is too much for them. So Jesus has to rescue them. He goes up to each of them and touches them. This little act of intimacy reminds each of them that he is there, he is with them. It is a deliberate act of friendship and solidarity. It is a more familiar voice that speaks to them now, saying 'Do not be afraid'; these words echo throughout the scriptures. But what are they afraid of? Is it the voice of the Father? Or might it be more than that? Have they, perhaps, realised for the first time just how big a thing this is that they have got themselves into, just how serious it all is, just what challenges might lie ahead of them? Perhaps it is a mixture of all these things. Life in general is just a little bit scary. In a way, of course, it makes perfect sense for them to be frightened. Jesus is going to encounter opposition and resistance, and so are they. The message of love, acceptance, mercy and justice will not be received with universal approval and delight.

Although in one sense it would be completely reasonable for them to be afraid, fear is a negative and crippling emotion. That is why, again and again, the scriptures ring out 'Do not be afraid!' The thing about fear is that, sometimes it makes us think far too much about what we are afraid of. We see it everywhere, we avoid doing certain things because it might ambush us there, or we restrict our lives to cut out all danger of what we are afraid of. Or, alternatively, we go the other

way. We just won't even think about the things that scare us, we shut our eyes, put our hands over our ears, and hope they will go away. Whichever way we go – thinking too much about the things that scare us, or too little, the truth is that our lives have become unbalanced. The trick, and it is not an easy one, is to give to everything in our lives, including the things that scare us, exactly the attention and weight that they deserve: not more, not less. Fear unbalances us because it stops us doing this, and we give the scary things too much attention or too little, but not the right amount. So Jesus says to his friends 'Do not be afraid' and he reaches out and touches them. There are three of them, so this has to be a very deliberate act, reaching out to them in turn. And then life returns to something more stable, more balanced and, for now at least, the fear has passed. The touch of Christ on the mountain is a sign of loving presence, of total commitment, a sign that his life is completely entwined with theirs and will not be separated from them, and that loving presence is enough to drive away the fear, because, as we know, 'Perfect love casts out fear' (1 John 4.8).

In today's Gospel story Jesus takes his three closest friends up the mountain, away from all the mess and the anxiety and confusion and uncertainty of everyday life, and there he gives them what they need to overcome the limiting effects of fear: a vision of his glory, a touch of intimacy, and an undying presence. Then they can go back down the mountain to face whatever life might throw at them. Here, today, he extends a similar invitation to us: to join him in a safe place; to expose our anxieties and fears to him and in doing so to see them for what they really are; and having seen them for what they really are, we can return to everyday life giving them just as much attention as they need, no more, no less. Up on the mountain the fears of the three apostles are faced and conquered. That is what the mountain was for, and still is. So, up the mountain we will go in a few moments time.