

2 Peter 1. 16 – end

Matthew 17. 1 – 9

Fr Alex

It's human nature to want to hold on to the good stuff, isn't it. If you cast your mind back to one of the moments in your life when you've been at your very happiest, I bet you've thought like me, "if only I could bottle that feeling." If only I could hold onto it somehow and keep it with me.

It doesn't even have to be anything really major; it can be as simple as something I experienced yesterday. After having had to rest at home for many weeks, and when the clouds and rain finally disappeared, I went outside for what feels like the first time this year and had a walk in the sunshine, and watched the birds. It was bliss.

But of course the clouds eventually come back, don't they, and the sun goes down, and the rain or even the snow falls. You can't hold on to that feeling for ever.

And that's actually the way it should be, of course. As lovely as it is, we can't really just have the warmth and light of the sun all the time; we need to rest in the darkness, too. The plants that we're now beginning to see flower, can only do it so abundantly in the spring if they have that long rest over winter. Some things – many things – are not meant to be held onto.

And I think the same sort of thing is going on with Jesus and the disciples in our Gospel reading this morning. Peter, James and John follow Jesus up a high mountain and he is "transfigured before them; his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white."

They are blinded by the glory of Jesus, they hear the voice of God; and Peter's completely reasonable response is to try to hold on to this feeling of wonder. He wants to keep it there, and offers to build three dwellings for Jesus and the two prophets, presumably so he can bask in the glory of their presence, and worship.

Peter's response is even more understandable if we look at the verses that immediately precede this event. Jesus has just explained to them that he must go to Jerusalem "and undergo great suffering ... and be killed." And Peter takes him aside and says "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you."

Jesus rebukes Peter, saying, "Get behind me, Satan! ... you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." But after those harsh words, six days later he brings him up the mountain and gives him the gift and the encouragement of this amazing vision of glory.

It will take Peter some time to understand, but Jesus is telling him and the others that yes, there is great glory to come; but that glory, that wonderful light, can only be entered by first confronting the darkness that lies before them. He's showing them their destination, but only so that they can gain the strength to undertake the journey. Because you can't have one without the other; you can't appreciate the brightness of the light without first knowing what the darkness looks like.

The presence of Moses and Elijah call to mind that other great biblical journey from darkness to light – the Exodus of God’s people from slavery in Egypt to the freedom of the promised land.

Moses too went up a mountain; a cloud overshadowed him for six days, and he witnessed the glory of the Lord. The “bright cloud” that we read about today is reminiscent of the pillar of cloud that was a beacon for the Israelites in their wilderness journey.

Jesus is making the same promise to the disciples that was fulfilled to God’s people of old; they will enter their promised land, but they must be willing to go into the wilderness first.

We’re given this reading today because the same encouragement is given to us, as we prepare to go with Jesus into the wilderness, in the holy season of Lent.

This is the journey that we must make before we can witness the glory of Easter. But it need not be a miserable one or even a difficult one. The Church refers to this in the liturgy as “the *joyful* season of Lent.”

Because it is a gift; an opportunity to look at our own lives and see the parts that are in need of God’s glory to shine; those parts of ourselves that we keep hidden in the darkness. Those are the things we can work on, during Lent, and bring them into the light.

But we undertake this journey with the promise that Easter *will* come; that even those things that seem to us that we could never change, can indeed be transfigured and transformed by our journey into the light.

And the promise and proof of this will be the cross: that even in the deepest darkness, the light will shine; even in the midst of death, life will triumph.

And I think Jesus is saying something more to the disciples. That even when they reach their destination: even when the horror of Good Friday and the desolation of Holy Saturday gives way to the joy of Easter Day, that glory is still not to be held onto. They can’t make a dwelling for it to stay in one place, they can’t bottle it up and keep it to themselves.

They need to keep going down the mountain, into the world, and keep looking for the light of his glory in the dark places of life. The risen and glorified Jesus will commission them not to huddle together in Jerusalem, but to go out into all the world; and he will empower them to shine with the same glory that he reveals to them today.

The end of their journey as ones who are led through the wilderness, is not in fact an end; but the beginning of a new journey in which they are the ones who lead those who are still lost in the wilderness.

That, indeed, is our Christian calling: that when we have witnessed the glory in our own lives, as we do in so many ways, not least in this Mass today: we are to go out and share that glory with others, in lives transfigured by grace, and shining brightly with the love and glory of God.

May we rejoice in this great gift and encouragement of this glorious vision this Lent. And may we undertake our journey faithfully, strong in the knowledge that whatever cross we may have to bear, Christ is there with us; he has already carried it before us, and he has already transformed it with the glory of his Easter life. Amen.