

Transfiguration and Hope

St Chad's 7th August 2011, Bishop Ronnie

The week before last, Liz and I stayed in Durham City for a few days. The main reason for our visit was to go back to the parish in Sunderland where I started my ordained ministry as a curate in 1952. We had a lovely welcome there from about twenty people, some of whom had been members of the Youth Club and Sunday School, (the Junior Church of those days).

For some of the time we were joined by all our children and five grandchildren which was marvellous. They wanted to see this strange place which I have so often talked about, with its shipyards and heavy industry, all of it gone now of course. Some of them also took the opportunity to look in at St James Park, home of Newcastle United football club of which our family are strong supporters. There they found a strip for sale with the words printed on it: "Newcastle United is my religion and St James Park is my church". It made me think of St Paul in Athens, looking at the statue of the unknown God, and suggesting to his audience that the God and Father of Jesus was the one who met that need.

I also took the opportunity to go to Bishopthorpe. To a gathering of retired bishops hosted by the Archbishop of York. We started with a Eucharist and a sermon about that early incident in the Gospels when Peter, James and John are urged by Jesus to launch their fishing boat into the deep. Having caught nothing earlier, they are understandably sceptical; however they do it, make a huge catch and learn among other things that God often goes with us in to an uncertain future and produces rich and unexpected results. Could this be a lesson for us in response to financial crisis?

Our preacher used this story as an encouragement to us oldies to face the changes and uncertainties of retirement positively. Don't look back with regrets or forward with fear. Wise advice, even if a bit late for many of us there who were well into retirement already!

But it set me thinking about a very different kind of future: and that brings me to the Transfiguration, which we are celebrating a day late, rather than miss it altogether as we so often do.

Interestingly, the same 3 disciples are there: Peter, James and John. Only this time they are not just reluctant and puzzled – they are clearly afraid. No longer the deep of an uncertain future, giving up their work to go with Jesus on his travels, but the even deeper deep of discovering who Jesus really was and what this might mean for the whole of their future life and relationships. They were, we are told, awe-struck, as they began to see their friend and leader in a new light ("awesome" in modern parlance).

At first they couldn't take it all in. And when Jesus told them to prepare for his arrest and death soon, that made it even worse. This was deep water indeed, and they must have wondered if they could survive it.

But they held on, with amazing consequences that we now know. And in a strange and powerful way, I think there is strength to be drawn from this ... I have reached that time of life, as many of you have, when the future is more about dying and death than it is about moving house, changing your job or retirement. . Don't be shocked by that simple statement. It doesn't mean I am depressed, just realistic. And of course it means that at some point you and I will have to launch out into a truly unknown deep and for many a scary and sometimes very painful journey too. What happens when I die? I don't really know. No one does. There are some promises in the New Testament, hints of a life hereafter and what it might be like. But we know too that the universe is vastly different from the world that the Biblical writers knew. Heaven is not up there and hell below in a 3 tier universe so to speak. Of course there are the resurrection appearances of Jesus, which give us hope that there is some kind of life ahead, not much more.

So I, like you, must wait and hope. But there is one thing we can and should do, I believe and that is to practise steadily the kind of attentive prayer we often call contemplation, of which the transfiguration gives us a glimpse. Don't be put off by the word (contemplation): it means something essentially simple, open to all of us.

A famous vicar of St Martin's in the Field, London in the 1920's Pat McCormick was asked by a visitor for his advice on looking at pictures in the National Gallery, nearby. He told her: "You must look, and look, and look until you see." Meaning of course the truth beneath the surface.

When you pray, try each day to be quite still for a few minutes, let God hold you as it were. Focus often on the person of Jesus, as Peter, James and John did. Then just a few words of adoration or wonder, perhaps repeated slowly: "My Lord and my God".

In this way I think we can prepare ourselves for the journey that lies ahead, the next deep and enter into renewed trust. Like the Psalmist, learn to walk hopefully through the valley of old age and finally death. Like the saints, look to Jesus, the author and end of our faith.

Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart,
Be naught else, save that thou art.