

Morningside Sermon 10.30am 26/2/17

Listening to Him Transfiguration Sunday

Exodus 24:12-18; Matthew 17:1-9

Just to the north of my old parish in Cupar you will find Hawklaw. The site has been the base for a number of intelligence listening stations for decades. It was established in 1927 as one of the first transatlantic radiotelephone receiving points, accepting transmissions from New York that were then sent south of the border to Rugby. In 1942 the Foreign Office acquired Hawklaw where it was one of the stations used to intercept German Naval coded traffic which was then sent on to Bletchely Park for decoding. After World War II the site was one of several used by GCHQ used to listen in to Eastern Bloc countries during the Cold War, and also played a part in monitoring events during the Suez Crisis. It employed around one hundred people. I've now told you several state secrets! Hawklaw was decommissioned in 1988. (and all of those state secrets are on Wikipedia – so I won't have to swear you to silence).

But there it stood on a high ridge above Cupar. Listening and watching, mostly going by unnoticed. Mostly in darkness, but occasionally a bright light on a hill would let you know that it was there, even if most people did not know what it was, or what it did. But it listened, and it shone, it protected and it communicated. At one time only the initiated understood what it did, now the whole world knows. It was a place where the plotting and scheming and the warring was listened to, and where information was passed on not only for the protection but for peace of our country and our world. Up on the high ridge, where heaven met earth, a message was listened to and then spoken.

The event of the Transfiguration takes place on a quiet high place. There is no need to get caught up in the mechanics or practicalities of what happened and how it happened. We need to note these things. It happened far from the corridors of power. The Transfiguration happened on the margins, away from the places where power reigned, but make no mistake that this is a story about power. It makes us ask where real power lies, and what it sounds like and looks like.ⁱ There is mystery and revelation, there is God revealed and hidden by the shining cloud.

There is the voice, last heard at the Baptism of Jesus, “This is my beloved Son, with Whom I am well pleased; listen to Him.” The same Son Who had a few days before told His followers about the road to Jerusalem and the cross that shadowed it. The beloved Son Who had taught grace and mercy, healing and welcome, inclusion and love. The beloved Son Whose every word and every action tells us that God is still speaking. Speaking then; speaking now.

Transfiguration is full of imagery – and Matthew writing in this gospel is writing in a Moses-shaped way. The Mount of Transfiguration echoes Sinai. Moses is born under Pharaoh’s death-threat, Jesus is threatened by Herod. Moses receives the Law on Mount Sinai, Jesus teaches the ‘Sermon on the Mount.’ Moses’ face shines for a time after He encounters God; Jesus’ face “shines like the sun”.ⁱⁱ When the people of Israel, and the disciples of Jesus, saw the shining, they were filled with terror. Peter at last stops his wittering on about building booths for the three figures of Jesus, Moses and Elijah and with James and John falls to the ground. The bright light and the commanding voice of God overwhelm them. Until, in this Transfiguration – this image of God in Christ real in heaven and on earth does something and says something. After the voice of God tells the followers of Jesus to listen to Him, Jesus acts and speaks. Out of the brightness and awe and fear, Jesus reaches out His hand and touches His disciples, and He tells them to get up, and He reassures them. “Do not be afraid.”

Out of the brightness and the frightening vision, Jesus reaches out, and the first words He speaks, that we are to listen to, are ‘get up’, the same as those He used when He touched the diseased, and the dead, and the outcast, and the lonely, and the unwelcome. Rise up – a little resurrection.

And then He spoke. “Do not be afraid.”

Nothing banishes our fears more perfectly than a simple, human touch. Nothing comforts us more than the gentle words: “Do not be afraid.” For John Calvin, the C16th Reformer, this was the great genius of God. God Who made the heavens and the earth and all that is in them; God Whose greatness cannot be contained by the things that God has fashioned; this God,

magnificent and mysterious is willing to come among us to reach out, touch us, and still our fears.

It is the promise of the angel to Joseph with the naming of Jesus. "...His Name shall be called Emmanuel (which means, God with us)." It is the promise of Jesus to the disciples on the storm-tossed sea. It is the promise of Jesus at the end of Matthew's gospel, after the resurrection, "...I am with you always." It is the promise of Jesus to you and to me. He will be with us, high in the heavens, down here on the earth, whatever changes, whatever transfigures, whatever no longer looks or feels the same, He will be with us. We do not need to be afraid. God comes to us quietly and gently, that we may draw near and not be afraid. Not to overwhelm us with majestic glory, but just enough glory that our human hand can hold. God's love and gentleness, when we are unsure, nervous, or fearful about what the future might hold, concentrated in a hand reaching out to us. Next week God will remind you of His nearness in another way, in the bread and the wine, just as much of God as a human hand can hold.ⁱⁱⁱ

And today, on this Transfiguration Sunday, God continues to remind us that new days are coming. We listen to Jesus; we listen to Him, and hear again His call to us to bring hope and healing to a broken world; to work for justice and peace; to share this good news to others who might be listening out for a word of hope and reassurance because they live with fear.

Perhaps like Jesus we too are meant to shine with that good news, making real what it is that we have listened to by putting it into action in what we say and what we do.

C. S. Lewis, in one of his Narnia Chronicles, the *Silver Chair*, writes a final word for Aslan, the Lion who is the Christ figure in the books:

"Here on the mountain I have spoken to you clearly. I will not often do so down in Narnia. Here on the mountain, the air is clear and your mind is clear; as you drop down into Narnia, the air will thicken. Take great care that it does not confuse your mind. And the signs which you have learned here will not look at all as you expect them to look, when you meet them there. That is why it is so important to know them by heart and pay no

attention to appearance. Remember the signs and believe the signs. Nothing else matters.^{iv}

The story of the Transfiguration is a mountaintop experience. We will all have had those shining times when we are lifted up from the ordinary and the everyday and see and understand things differently. But the story of the Transfiguration is lived out not on a mountaintop, but back on the low ground, in the ordinary moments of our homes, our offices, our shops, our boardrooms, our classrooms, our soup kitchens. We bring the message of the light to every place where we are called to be. The light of God finds us wherever we are, and when we stop, and still our minds, our mouths and our hearts, God in Jesus will speak. He will tell us to get up. He will tell us not to be afraid.

“This is my beloved Son, with Whom I am well pleased; listen to Him.”

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

ⁱ Leith Fisher, ‘But I say to you’, p213

ⁱⁱ Patrick J Willson, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 1, p455

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid* p455-457

^{iv} C S Lewis, The Silver Chair, in Feasting on the Word, Vol A, p454