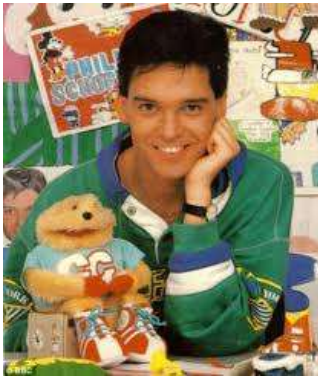


Sermon for 14/2/21 – Mark 9.2-9 – The Transfiguration

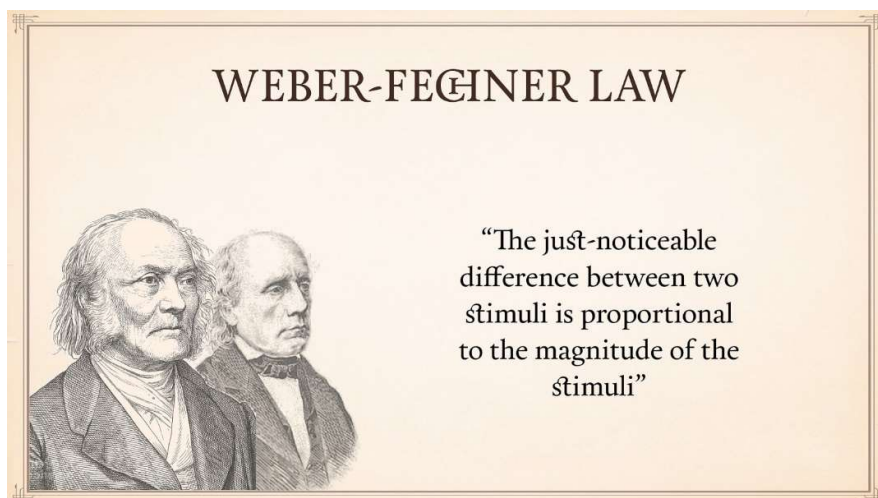


Hello. This is my first Zoom talk and I am feeling more than a little anxious. I have not done this before, it involves tech that I don't understand, and my internet is ropey. If my screen freezes with my face in an unflattering rictus; Peter has the sermon notes and he will carry on. Peter has been instructed to ensure that the unflattering rictus is a frozen screen, and not just a normal pose though.

I know I am anxious because I have an almost overwhelming desire to produce a glove puppet. What? A glove puppet? Yes, because sitting here talking to a camera reminds me of BBC Children's television in which Philip Schofield sat in the broom cupboard with Gordon the Gopher.

What has that got to do with feeling anxious? Well, whenever I feel anxious, I want to reduce the situation to the ordinary. It just makes it more manageable and laughing is better than stressing. Please be assured that I don't have a glove puppet, well not with me at least.

Anyway, taking a deep breath; I will explain Weber's law.



Weber's law is well known to Psychology undergraduates. Weber's law most simply stated says that the size of the just noticeable difference of a stimulus is a constant proportion of the original stimulus. In other words, if you turn on a light in an already brightly lit room you won't notice much difference; but if you turn on the same light in a dim room, you will notice a big difference. It predicts, for instance why you can see a tiny candle flame for miles in darkness.



It would also suggest that that you can boil a frog without it noticing, by very gradually increasing the temperature of the water. This is a myth and frogs tested in this way survive. Apparently whilst they may not perceive the incremental changes in temperature of the water; their separate thermal regulation mechanism reaches the froggy equivalent of “flippin heck, its hot in here” and out they hop.

Why is this relevant? Well, the frog not so much; but today we are going to think about the bright revelation of Gods glory against the background of ordinary humanity. Our Gospel reading is of the Transfiguration of Christ.



The Transfiguration, Raphael, c 1520

Mark's gospel opens with ordinary detail. Jesus goes up a high mountain with Peter, James and John. However, the background events as related in Mark's tightly packed gospel are far from ordinary. In just the previous Chapter 8 of Mark's gospel, Jesus has fed the five thousand, healed a blind man at Bethesda, declared that he is Messiah, predicted his death, and declared the way of the cross. So whatever Peter, James and John are expecting, a stiff uphill walk is probably the least of it. Although I doubt that they are expecting what is about to occur.

The words of the Transfiguration are familiar to us, but familiarity with the words tends to make them ordinary. What is about to happen is extra ordinary. Jesus is Transfigured. We tend to imagine this as dazzlingly bright light. So bright that detail cannot be seen. So bright that it can scarcely be looked at-like having the sun in your eyes.



The words transfiguration and transformation are often used interchangeably. Really they are different. Jesus is Transfigured, his OUTWARD appearance is changed. He remains Jesus and God. God and Jesus. He is not different to how he has always been, but the disciples are able to perceive him differently. The man may be ordinary but his transfiguration is so different that at last the disciples can perceive the extra ordinary. Transformation, on the other hand, is about INWARD change. Jesus has not changed inwardly. He is as He always was.

This is the perceptual equivalent of being in a dark room and having a bright light suddenly turned on. The disciples cannot fail to perceive this change. They must have been shocked, terrified. So far Jesus has been their friend, a human being who was living a life like theirs. There would have been lots of ordinary experiences; walking, talking, eating together, sleeping, laughing,

arguing. Against this were extraordinary experiences of miracles; like feeding the five thousand; like healing the blind man. These extraordinary experiences would have been woven into the life that they had with Jesus. I wonder if they stopped being able to tell the difference at any point. Whether they stopped perceiving some of the extra ordinary experiences as quite so extra ordinary. “Where’s Jesus?”. “Just nipped off to heal a leper” “Oh OK”.

Did they just get used to him doing his Jesus thing. Did His extra-ordinary become indistinguishable from the ordinary.

Well if it did, witnessing his Transfiguration would have changed all that.



The Transfiguration mosaic in Daphni Monastery, near Constantinople.

Peter, bless him, spots Elijah and Moses who have turned up and thinks that the best, most helpful and most practical thing to do would be to build some shelters for them. Of course, they are part of the revelation of the Transfiguration; linking Jesus with Moses the law giver and through the prophets “the laws and the prophets”. Offering the link between the Old Testament and the New and the fulfilment of Jewish prophesy in the Messiah who they now see before them.

Peter’s response is rather understandable. Witnessing the extraordinary would have been terrifying. Not just the physical shock of seeing Jesus transfigured, but the mind bending impact of being exposed to the Glory of God. Surely that is just far too big to get your head around. So what do you do when faced with this. Fall to the ground, cover your eyes, turn away. The disciples must have done all these things; and then what? Once you have got

your breath back, perhaps you react like Peter did and become practical and revert to the ordinary. Peter was so frightened, that he did not know what to say; so he greeted them politely and offered to build shelter. It was probably a bit cold and windy up on that high place. A very human response. I would have probably have done something similar. If it had happened here, one of us would have had a thermos and we would have offered everyone a cup of tea.

Most of us, most of the time lead ordinary lives. Many of us will have been coming to church for years; the liturgy, the readings, the hymns, comforting and familiar to us. We are not really liking this Zoom malarky but we are certainly getting used to it. We usually like the ordinary, we like routine and familiarity, we like predictability and planning; all of it is comforting. Our faith is largely woven into this ordinary fabric and separating it out is often difficult. Mostly our thoughts and behaviours are shaped by our faith, even when we are not behaving in very Christian ways. Even when we get things wrong we view these mistakes through the lens of faith.



So, do we need a Transfiguration? The disciples did. They needed God to reveal himself. They needed to see His Glory in the human form of their friend. They needed the signs that the messianic prophesy had been fulfilled.

What about us. Do we need it? We have heard the whole story now; the fact that we are here would suggest that we have accepted the truth of the Trinity; do we need to be convinced?

Probably not convinced but certainly reminded. We need the reminder of God's glory in our ordinary lives, in living out our faith in ordinary ways. Certainly in the potentially mind numbing monotony of Lockdown, we need it. Imagine what it would be like to be present at a Transfiguration like event. Thrown to the ground by the splendour of it. Awe Inspiring, confusing, terrifying, invigorating, validating, life changing, Transforming.

In the absence of the full on top of the mountain experience (although some people may be very lucky) we sometimes do have glimpses of Glory, small moments of revelation. Many people will have personal stories of this. But however small the glimpse, it lifts our ordinary faith; helps us to perceive a bit of the greatness of God. These experiences are more than the More than the “just noticeable difference”. And of course, the story helps us too. We can imagine the scene, imagine what it might have been like to be there, be lifted out of the ordinary. For us, it will not be transfiguration-an outward change, for us it is transformational.

Daily we live out a faith in an Extra ordinary Saviour, with an extraordinary message, and we live it out, in mostly ordinary ways. Being open to Transfiguration and allowing ourselves to be transformed by an experience of the Glory of God has to make a perceptible difference.

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

Melanie Hambly, 10 February 2020