

Sunday 11th February 2018. Transfiguration/Sunday before Lent.

Canongate Kirk.

St Mark 9:9 *As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.*

It used to be that the Feast of the Transfiguration was always celebrated in August, well away from any other of the main festivals of the Church. But nowadays it has become the custom to commemorate the dazzling experience of Jesus on the mountaintop on this last Sunday before Lent. In the first instance marking the Transfiguration **now** brings, I suppose, the season of weeks after the Epiphany to an end, the season which began with the equally illuminating manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles, symbolised by the gifts of the wise men from the east, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And secondly it anticipates, as did those gifts, the beginning of Lent this coming week and the subsequent season of forty days and forty nights that take us all the way towards Easter. If today we were to stand with Jesus on the mountaintop, as it were, we could look, therefore, with a clear view in two quite different directions. Back to his birth and forward to his death. Inevitably there are valleys stretching before us in either direction. The valley of the shape of his life. The valley of the shadow of his death.

As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. It sounds at this stage as if Jesus himself were more focussed on his death and resurrection. That is after all the direction in which he is heading as he makes his way down the mountain and passages either side of our Gospel reading this morning indicate that by now he was taking every opportunity to tell his disciples in no uncertain terms exactly what lay ahead. He had to go to Jerusalem, he explained, and endure great suffering at the hands of the elders, chief priests, and scribes; to be put to death and to be raised again on the third day. But the disciples couldn't get their heads round it, couldn't begin to understand, even those who formed his closest set of friends and followers, Peter and James and John. So how much more alarmed must they have been by the strange and unsettling vision on this mountaintop of the Transfiguration. Which is probably why *As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.*

At 9 o'clock on Friday morning I found myself at the top of the mountain of the Royal Mile, leading an act of commemoration in the Scottish National War Memorial for French and Scottish rugby players who lost their lives during the First World War. This afternoon at Murrayfield a new trophy marking the Auld Alliance will be presented when the match is over, presented by the descendants of the two captains Eric Milroy for Scotland and Marcel Burgun for France who led their teams out to play an international in 1913 and who were both killed in action within the next few years, and it was those families that met in the Castle on Friday morning to remember them and others like them who died not on the rugby field but on the battlefields of France. Leading their teams out in 1913 they can have had no idea of what lay ahead, but both joined up on the outbreak of war, and both suffered and died in the cause of freedom and peace, Marcel Burgun as a pilot in those primitive flying machines in 1915 and Eric Milroy serving with the Black Watch at the Somme in 1916. Before the war Scotland's rugby captain was an accountant living and working here in Edinburgh

and in Eric Milroy's last letter home, written the evening before his part in the assault on Delville Wood in which he would lose his life, he refers perhaps inevitably to rugby. It was a family joke that his mother, worried that he would be injured, would always say as he left the house for a match: "Keep well back, Eric" - possibly not ideal advice for a scrum-half. In the final letter to his mother he writes: "We are in for some slight trouble tomorrow. So I am just warning you that there is to be no 'keeping well back' then." Within hours he was declared "missing presumed dead".

There was to be no keeping well back for Jesus of Nazareth either and as Lent approaches it's worth remembering that the forty days and forty nights that had marked the beginning of his ministry some three years or so before were not spent on the mountaintop in or out of cloud, above and beyond the realm of ordinary everyday experience. By contrast they were spent out in the wilderness, in the bleak and barren flat lands and battlefields of the desert, at ground level, where people struggled to survive, the very people Jesus would come alongside and whose struggle he would share. From time to time, he would head to the mountain tops, there's no doubt about that, but he never spent long up there, and he always came down more determined and more resolute than when he went up. It was after all *As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.* And then he carried on, sharing their struggle and showing them how they might live and believe and reflect his transfiguring glory even when the cloud descended unexpectedly and they simply couldn't see a thing.

*Clothed in light upon the mountain,
stripped of might upon the cross,
shining in eternal glory,
harrowing hell to save the lost,
you, the everlasting instant;
you, who are **our** gift and cost.*

Bring us, O Lord God, wrote the poet John Donne, at our last awakening into the house and gate of heaven, to enter into the gate and dwell in that house, where there shall be no darkness nor dazzling, but one equal light; no noise nor silence, but one equal music; no fears nor hopes, but one equal possession; no ends nor beginnings, but one equal eternity; in the habitations of thy glory and dominion, world without end. Amen.

As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

And now may God bless to us this preaching of his most holy word, and to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be all praise and glory now and forever. Amen.