

Sunday 23rd February 2020. Transfiguration/Sunday before Lent.

St Matthew 17: 9 *As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead"*

Although it's still a bit early to find ourselves surrounded by what Wordsworth famously described as "a host of golden daffodils", the odd daffodil now evolving tentatively into bud reminds us that next Sunday is St David's Day and Ash Wednesday is even sooner. 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 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, Jesus ordered them "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised 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. But they couldn't get their heads round it, they 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 confused must they have been by this strange and unsettling vision on the mountaintop. Which is probably why *Jesus ordered them (to) "Tell no one about the vision..."*

It's not difficult to see why today's Old Testament reading was chosen as a prelude to the Gospel. A journey up the mountain, a cloud coming

down, a reference even to forty days and forty nights, it's all there already in the earlier Scriptures set down so many centuries before St Matthew took up his pen. In this case, of course, it was not just a vision of Moses that went up the mountain but Moses in person. It was Moses who encountered the dazzling glory of the Lord, Moses who spent forty days and forty nights up there on the holy mountain of Sinai. And when eventually he came down, he was carrying the tablets of stone on which were engraved the Ten Commandments. *As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead"*.

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 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, (that) Jesus ordered them "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised 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 clouds closed in unexpectedly, clouds of confusion, clouds of frustration, 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.*

For that gift, for that cost, and not least for our timely commemoration of it all in the Sacrament of Holy Communion, thanks be to God. Amen.