

## Sunday 26 February 2006: Sunday next before Lent

### What would you do if you were not afraid?

**Readings: 2 Corinthians 4:3-6; Mark 9:2-9**

*'Peter did not know what to say, for they were terrified.'* Mark 9:6

According to the BBC News website the US state of Alabama has locked horns with nearby Georgia in a row over the humble peach. Alabama wishes to make the peach one of its state symbols, its chosen official tree fruit – a great honour for the peach but a significant problem for the neighbouring state of Georgia, which already brands itself The Peach State.

This morning with the story of Christ's Transfiguration ringing in our ears the peach story gives rise to a question in my mind which might possibly be pertinent:

If Alabama gets its way and honours the peach, elevating it to a new status in its national life and the life of its citizens, will the nature of the peach itself have changed – or will it simply be that the people of Alabama begin to see the peach in a different way? And if it's just that the people begin to see the peach in a different way, will this be because something significant has happened in the life of the peach that has unveiled its true nature, or will it be that something significant has happened in the life of the people to enable them to look with new eyes at what has always, actually, been quite apparent to anyone with the ability to truly see peaches?

And so for centuries preachers have wrestled with the question: did something actually happen to Jesus at the Transfiguration, or did something happen to the disciples that enabled them to see what they had not previously seen? If it was the disciples' eyes that cleared, did something also happen to Jesus to make more obvious what was inherently in his nature in the first place?

The Orthodox Church traditionally blesses fruit on the Feast of the Transfiguration. I guess that's in recognition that here is a wonderful image of the life of God at work in all created things. The transfiguration of seed into plant into flower into fruit, which then produces seed again. All of us have this possibility of growth and change and fruitfulness if we engage with the work of God within us. There is something that continually identifies us as essentially our self, yet that self is a self in constant flux and development, emerging, growing, re-forming, being renewed – a biological and spiritual entity constantly discovering new things about itself in relationship with the Creator.

St Paul's description in 2 Corinthians of the work of the gospel in the world carries some lovely images. The gospel is there but some of us are blinded to it, says Paul – all of us are blinded to it at times, we would probably say. He says the God of this world blinds us – we might blame our own stubbornness, our forgetfulness, our insistence on going it alone – either way, we would surely admit to blindness.

Then he speaks of what, in our moments of blindness, we are missing: The light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. God's glory in Christ – the glory of life lived as it might be if only we managed to keep our eye on the ball – life in all its fullness, its depth, its fruition, its restfulness. Life as it can be when our roots push deep into the soil of God's love and our face is turned to the sun of Christ's gracious humanity. Life saturated with the water and warmth of God's glory.

If we can live that way, even only for short spells whilst our concentration is at its best, what might we hope for as signs of transformation – of transfiguration – in our own lives? What part of your life, or yourself, would you have God transfigure? If you let your imagination fly, what person would you be? What would you look like if you were fully rooted in God? And what stops you from being so?

St Martin-in-the-Fields Ltd (or SMITFL) is the business that resources the work of this church. In preparation for a recent Awayday during which we were to draft the Vision and Goals of SMITFL, all members of the Senior Management Group read the book ‘Who Moved my Cheese?’ It’s one of the current bestsellers in the popular business books list and it’s a bit of a corny story but in a funny sort of way quite helpful. It’s all about how to stay focussed on what matters, and then how to achieve it, and one of the key questions it suggests that we ask ourselves in our search for what our best goals might be is ‘What would you do if you were not afraid?’

Your response might be that you’re not afraid of anything and that fear would certainly not prevent you from doing something you wanted to do – but if you can say that honestly and always you’re quite unusual, I think.

‘What would you do if you were not afraid?’ Peter was afraid, watching the newly-transfigured Jesus talking to Elijah and Moses. And he allowed the fear to divert his energies into irrelevant and frenetic activity – ‘Rabbi it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings’.

But there was no need to be afraid. If he could have just sat quietly with his fear, with the strangeness of the situation, his uncertainty about his own role in it, the unknown future - and waited and watched and learned – there might have been a gradual unveiling within him of the meaning and goodness of things, and his own part within them – of the meaning and goodness of people and his own potential. But his fear took over, and fear is rarely fruitful.

We can be forgiven for living in fear in these days when we look to Israel-Palestine and see even greater instability than we have for some time; to Iraq and see Shia-Sunni conflict as well as the complex relationship between the people of that country and the overseas forces present; and to situations much closer to home where we see armed robbery and abduction, or the death of children at the hands of their parents.

There are many situations where it would be foolish not to fear and where fear is a necessary human response to ensure self-protection, and the protection of those we love. But even when we inevitably *act from* a position of fear it mostly it doesn’t pay to *act out of* fear. Sitting quietly with James and John rather than panicking with Peter we can work at understanding what the transfiguration of a situation, or of ourselves, might mean. What sort of goals the vision might suggest that we aim for. How we might achieve them.

What situation in the world or in yourself do you long that God might transform? How do you pray and work for it in the faith of God’s power to transfigure?

‘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.’ Sometimes we have to wait for the meaning of what we’ve seen to be unveiled. And in the meantime there are more fruitful ways of responding to God’s holiness than living in a state of perpetual semi-panicked activity.

*‘And from the cloud there came a voice, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!’*”