

## Down from the mountain

Today is the last Sunday before the season of Lent, and today is also Transfiguration Sunday. In our gospel reading, we heard Luke's account of the transfiguration – when Jesus took Peter, James and John up the mountain, and the disciples saw him transfigured – the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. Not only that, Moses and Elijah appeared there, and were talking with Jesus. And then, the voice of God spoke from heaven “This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him.”

Absolutely amazing stuff, and far removed – I think – from our own experiences of Jesus. You might remember that, at the end of last September, when we were doing church online, we looked at the parallel passage from Mark's gospel. (It's on the website if you're keen and want to go back and revisit that reflection).

In today's reading, Luke tells us that after the transfiguration “The disciples kept this [what they had seen and heard] to themselves and did not tell anyone at that time what they had seen.”

Mark gives us a little more, telling us “As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead.” (that's from Mark 9:9).

I reflected last year about why that might have been – because we're used to, in churches, being told to tell people about Jesus. But here we have the order not to tell anyone what they had seen ... and not long before in this chapter of Luke's gospel (9:20-21), we had the exchange where Jesus asked the disciples “Who do you say I am?” and Peter responded “God's Messiah.” To which, strangely, Jesus strictly warned them not to tell this to anyone.

So we do wonder why they might not have told anyone else about these things, and why Jesus wouldn't have wanted them to.

I think there may have been a practical dimension to the disciple's secrecy, and to Jesus' instruction. We know that the crowds were already a problem for Jesus – we heard about the sermon on the lake a few weeks ago, where Jesus had to be rowed out onto the lake so that he could preach to the crowds without being crushed. So the outright declaration that Jesus was the messiah, or the eyewitness accounts of the transfiguration, might have caused the crowds to grow even bigger, and been even more problematic to deal with.

But we do know that the disciple's silence was only temporary, because we have the gospel accounts now, including from John who was one of the three that was with Jesus – and we have the apostle Peter's own account in his second letter as well (2 Peter 16-21).

The silence ended because when Jesus' mission was completed in his death and resurrection, when the work of salvation was accomplished, Jesus gave them a new instruction: “... you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)

It became the time for them, and all believers to share the good news... and we can think about how that message has been shared over and over again, and is the reason we are here today.

So, that's the transfiguration, but then Luke's narrative moves on, and he tells us "The next, day, when they came down from the mountain, a large crowd met him." We see this several times in the gospel – Jesus manages to get away from the crowd for a while, but the crowd is always ready, always waiting for his return, always wanting more.

They may not have known yet that he was the messiah, the chosen one, the Son of God, but they knew he was a healer, a wise teacher, a man who could work miracles – and just flicking through Luke's gospel so far, we can see that he has driven out an evil spirit from a man in Capernaum, healed Simon Peter's mother-in-law, and many others, healed a man with leprosy, healed a paralysed man, healed the centurion's servant, even raised a widow's son from the dead, cast out the demon from the Gerasene man, healed the bleeding woman, and brought back to life Jairus' daughter as well.

If you wanted healing for yourself or your family, you sought Jesus out. If you wanted to hear a message of hope, you sought Jesus out. If you were in a dark place, you sought Jesus out. If you wanted to be inspired you sought Jesus. And so the crowds flocked to hear him. To see him. To have his hands laid on them or even just to touch the hem of his cloak.

And so, having been on the mountain, having been transfigured and having talked with Moses and Elisha, in that amazing scene, Jesus comes down from the mountain, and immediately he's thrust back to the realities of 1<sup>st</sup> century life.

The next, day, when they came down from the mountain, a large crowd met him. (9:38).

Amongst all the voices calling out to him, Jesus hears one in particular: "A man in the crowd called out, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son, for he is my only child." (9:38).

Why this man, among all the others? We don't know. Perhaps it was because he was asking for something for his son, not himself. Perhaps there was some other reason. Maybe this was the one of many healings that took place then, but the one that Luke chose to record.

The man explains to Jesus: "A spirit seizes him and he suddenly screams; it throws him into convulsions so that he foams at the mouth. It scarcely ever leaves him and is destroying him." (9:39).

People will often try to explain in modern medical terms what "A spirit seizes him... [and] throws him into convulsions" might be. It might be schizophrenia, or it might be epilepsy or it might be something else... modern medicine isn't too keen on the idea of possession by spirits.

But I don't think it matters what it might be, whether it be mental or physical or even supernatural. I think Luke, who was a physician himself (Colossians 4:14), would have investigated as far as he could. I don't think it matters, because to those who were there it was a spirit that seized the boy, that made the boy scream and convulse and foam at the mouth. They could see this boy being slowly destroyed by whatever this was.

And so this boy's father turned to Jesus – "I beg you to look at my son".

He'd tried the disciples; perhaps those that were left at the base of the mountain while Jesus, Peter, James and John went up the mountain, but they hadn't been able to help. Now, we're used to Jesus being the one who does the healing, but Jesus did give that power to his disciples too – just back at the beginning of this chapter "When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick." (9:1-2)

The man explains "I begged your disciples to drive it out, but they could not." This spirit, or this sickness, was too much for them.

Jesus response is a difficult one: "You unbelieving and perverse generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you and put up with you? Bring your son here." (9:41)

There's some dispute about who the first part of Jesus' response is directed at: Is it the father of the boy? Is it the crowd? Or is it the disciples? The weight of opinion is that the answers are 'no', 'probably not' and 'probably'. So it's not the father that's being told he's unbelieving and perverse, it's probably not the crowd, but it probably the disciples who Jesus is describing as unbelieving and perverse.

Think about that for a moment: Jesus, at the beginning of the chapter, gives the disciples power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, and now, 40-odd verses later, they are unable to do so because they are unbelieving and perverse. It leads in to the next part of chapter 9 where we find the disciples arguing among themselves who will be the greatest, and worrying about someone who was not one of the Twelve driving out demons in Jesus' name (9:46-50).

It seems that the disciples haven't properly grasped everything that's going on yet.

But here, gets angry with them. And I like that Luke records it, because Christians – and people generally, for that matter – often have a mental picture of Jesus as a placid, serene, loving (but not in an emotional way) figure that sort of passes through history doing nice things, and being nice to people, maybe sometimes criticising the religious hierarchy of the time, but not really showing much displeasure with others.

But here, Jesus gets stuck in to his disciples "You unbelieving and perverse generation, how long shall I stay with you and put up with you?"

Or maybe it's less anger, and more exasperation "You unbelieving and perverse generation," [Jesus sighed, rolling his eyes] "how long shall I stay with you and put up with you?"

Take your pick. The angry response speaks to me.

Either way, though, this is troubling for us. As Christians, we know that it's not the amount or strength of faith that's important – after all, Jesus said "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you." (Luke 17:6). We know that it's not the amount or strength of faith that's important, it's who we have our faith in that matters.

If our faith is in Jesus, we're okay. Right?

And yet Jesus said (or shouted or sighed) "You unbelieving and perverse generation, how long shall I stay with you and put up with you?"

The disciples were a special case – at least on this particular occasion – because Jesus had given them this authority, this power, and because of their lack of faith, or their immaturity, or their lack of confidence in the authority and power entrusted to them – or their ability to use it, or perhaps they were afraid of exercising that power and authority. But they'd failed.

They'd acknowledged Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God. But despite that, they hadn't trusted him.

And there's something in that for us today: We acknowledge Jesus as the Christ, Jesus as a saviour, Jesus as our hope, but do we trust him? When push comes to shove, do we trust him. We might acknowledge Jesus as our saviour in our hearts, but do we acknowledge Jesus as our saviour publicly?

Many of the conversations I've had with people over the last few months have included talking about how the church has become less important – or even unimportant – in wider society. It used to count in your favour if you included church membership and church work on your resume, but these days, except for a few specific jobs, the thought is that it counts against you.

And for those who preach or pray in church or lead bible studies – do we follow Jesus' teaching, or do we tone it down, or subtly to make it more palatable to others? Or to make it more palatable to ourselves?

Jesus asks, "You unbelieving and perverse generation, how long shall I stay with you and put up with you?"

The good news is that that the answer to that question is 'as long as we need'. The disciples lacked the faith and belief and trust, but Jesus stuck with them. Peter denied him three times, but Jesus stuck with him. Thomas and the others doubted the fact of his resurrection, but Jesus stuck with them.

Our faith will falter. We may find things overwhelming. We may fail to use the gifts that Jesus has given us. But Jesus will stick with us, for as long as we need. And our lack of faith or strength or skill or whatever isn't going to stop Jesus.

The disciples had failed, but Jesus said to the father "Bring your son here."

And we read that Even while the boy was coming, the demon threw him to the ground in a convulsion. But Jesus rebuked the impure spirit, healed the boy and gave him back to his father. (9:42)

It's interesting that we don't have an account of how Jesus rebuked the impure spirit, while we do have the detail of how he rebuked the disciples. I think that's because we're like the disciples, not like the impure spirit. The disciples had a problem, but the impure spirit was the problem.

And we all have problems. Some big, some small. Some public, some private. We all have problems, but we are not the problem. God doesn't want to get rid of us, God wants us to be reconciled with him.

So Jesus healed the boy – he removed the problem, and gave the boy back to his father. He restored the boy to his father. He was no longer under the control of the impure spirit, but back with his father.

And then today's reading ends with Luke telling us "And they were all amazed at the greatness of God." (9:43)

There is no question among the crowd about the source of Jesus' power. They may not have yet known he was the Christ, the promised Messiah, but they knew his power could only have come from God.

The important thing wasn't that Jesus was better at casting out spirits than his disciples, and it wasn't even that he had authority over the spirit. The important thing, for that crowd, is that Jesus came from God. "And they were all amazed at the greatness of God."

It brings us back to what we learn of Jesus from the story of the Transfiguration: A voice came from the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him".

There's the bright lights and the glorious splendour and Moses and Elijah, and that's all significant, but the most important part is that voice, and what it says. This is the relationship of God the Father, to God the Son.

We are all members, at times at least, of an unbelieving and perverse generation. But we can take heart that Jesus will stick with us as long as we need. And he will empower us, and strengthen us, and equip us, to part of his church and part of his kingdom.

We are privileged to live when we do. The disciples didn't know the full story yet, but we know the full story of Christ. To have God's glory revealed in the scriptures, in creation and in all our lives. So let us trust him, let us share in his glory, and let us also share it with others.

Amen.