

## SERMON FOR LENT 2A 2017

### ALL SAINTS CHURCH, BIRKENHEAD

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This week I went and saw the film ‘Silence’. It is based on a novel which tells the story of two Jesuit Priests who face the ultimate test of faith when they travel to Japan in search of their missing mentor at a time when Christianity was outlawed and their presence forbidden. It is a tough film to watch. It depicts Japanese Christians being tortured and killed by the authorities. However, despite this cruel reality it is also a powerful film about faith, the often meaninglessness of suffering, and why we often feel God is silent in our darkest moments. Hence the title of the film ‘silence’.

This silence of God is something I am sure we have experienced at least once in our lives.

Times where we do not feel like God is there, nor cares.

Often in these times we need to draw back to our memories of times when we did experience God’s presence or love. In a way, today’s Gospel acts as one of those experiences for the disciples of Jesus. An experience they can draw strength from when God feels distant, even silent. And these desires for experience are not just confined to those in the church. Everywhere it seems people are looking for an experience, the divine, they just find it in other places.

For years now there has been the popular statement, ‘I am spiritual but not religious.’ This line has been particularly popular in the post Christian West, where people have drifted away from organized religion, often seeking their spiritual fulfillment in Eastern religion, or versions of.

At the heart of this movement it seems is the very real desire to experience transfiguration here and now, regardless of the terminology we choose to use. In the end, people want a sense of the transcendent, the numinous, the holy, something outside of ourselves that is a cause for awe and wonder.

And perhaps that same desire of transcendence is what our disciples are looking for and are in need of in today's Gospel.

It is a remarkable story. John, Peter and James accompany Jesus up a mountain to pray, and here he is seemingly transformed right before their eyes.

This has the disciples rather spooked. Which leads Peter to spurt out a rather silly statement, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

What on earth is Peter going on about? Why does Peter want to make 'three dwellings' for these ghostly transfigured characters?

Well I think the writer of Luke is doing something deliberate here. He wants to hint to us that this transfiguration scene is more than meets the eye. Firstly, he tells us that Moses, that great prophet of the Law is there present with Jesus. Secondly, he tells us that Elijah, the great prophet of Israel is also present. Luke wants us to make a connection that perhaps we have seen such a scene as this before. A scene of great importance in the Hebrew Scriptures.

None other than the story of Moses who goes up Mount Sinai to receive the law, and while there, also has his face transformed and becomes

radiant. Luke has included this story and this especially strange statement by Peter to reinforce to his readers that Jesus is in the line with the great prophets, Moses and Elijah, but is in fact greater than these.

It is all about giving weight to its Jewish audience that Jesus is the messiah of Israel.

But what about the Gentile believer? Those who are not of the Old Covenant? What does this Transfiguration scene declare to us?

I think it is declaring two truths that are important to ponder. Firstly, the place of religious experience as a human experience shared by many. Religious experience has the power to transform and empower people to do great things. But when I say ‘religious experience’ I don’t just mean the clichéd idea

that Jesus appears to us in a white light, with white robes flowing, but that seemingly universal experience of many different people who sincerely seek to discover God in the mystery of our world.

These may be the many ‘spiritual but not religious’ people who are longing for an experience that transforms them. For in the end, the transfiguration is all about change and how we all struggle with change, with transformation.

For Transformation is hard. Change is hard. Traversing from one place to another, from one way of being to another. It’s easier to stay the same. Stay the course. Convince yourself that what you’ve always known is satisfactory and sufficient even when you have glimpsed what could be.

What the transfiguration does, is surprise us, but we need to be open to surprise by allowing ourselves to experience God in worship through beauty, music and contemplation.

So that's why the Transfiguration is so important.

And Secondly, like Peter, sometimes we don't have the right words for our experiences so we tend to splutter out something rather strange, or as the disciples did, keep it to ourselves.

I think as a community we need to be honest about our experiences, this way we can have a conversation about what we think they really are and how they could be understood.

The power of experience and dreams can tell us significant things about ourselves. Carl Jung the great Swiss Psychologist was someone who spent his life delving into his subconscious and the world of experience.

Jung's work on himself and his patients convinced him that life has a spiritual purpose beyond material goals.

Our main task, he believed, is to discover and fulfil our deep innate potential.

Based on his study of Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Gnosticism, Taoism, and other traditions, Jung believed that this journey of transformation, which he called individuation, is at the mystical heart of all religions. It is a journey to meet the self and at the same time to meet the Divine. Unlike Sigmund Freud's objectivist worldview, Jung's view may have led

him to believe that spiritual experience was essential to our well-being, as he specifically identifies individual human life with the universe as a whole. The Transfiguration is one way of seeing this profound truth.

For Transfiguration means a new way of seeing the world. And replacing the lenses of our lives is a lot more complicated than picking out new fashionable frames.

Because at the heart of the matter is that transfiguration not only signals change, but alters life's direction. It certainly did for Jesus. And when that happens, well, no tent in the world is going to give you the security you think you want or need. Because when we shore up the shelters that protect us from harm we also run the risk of keeping out that which is so very, very good.