

St. Aidan's West Epping, 23rd February 2020

**“EYES TO SEE AND EARS TO LISTEN” (Transfiguration)
(Exodus 24:12-18; Psalm 2; 2 Peter 1:16-21; Matthew 17:1-9)**

It's a world full of noise. Cars, planes, radios, mobile phones. At the supermarkets, bright music is streamed through to put you in a mood to buy more. You stop at a set of traffic lights and hear the beat of the music coming from the car beside you. You go out for a meal, and far too often you realize that it is noisy not just because there are a lot of people talking, but because the place has been designed with reflective surfaces so that the noise of people is magnified. I must admit I try to avoid those places, but others seem to love them! Genuine peace and quiet is hard to find.

And many people prefer it that way. Many people keep the radio or TV on most of the time when they are at home, even if they are not specifically focussing on it. I must admit that I like to have good music on while I am working or reading in the study.

Mind you, there are times when I really do want to have quiet. Early in the day is generally when I take time to read the scriptures, to reflect on them, and to pray about them and about other matters that I want to share with the Lord. That is my *Quiet Time*, and it is deliberately a **quiet** time, to give me space to focus and listen.

Yes, it is a noisy world, with plenty of voices trying to get our attention. Loved ones with their needs, advertisers, politicians, church leaders. Phone calls and emails from people we don't know but who want a response from us. It is amazing how much information we are fed, and how many voices seek our attention.

Noise, voices, ideas, issues, requests. Perhaps it's not such a bad idea to stop and think – and to listen. Yes, **listen!** Our politicians listen to the pollsters, to the image-makers, to people with influence, to strident voices. But what about us? What voices do we listen to? What messages do we actually take in for more than a moment? That is the question raised by our Gospel reading, Matthew's account of that strange event, the Transfiguration of Jesus.

It was just a week after Jesus had asked the disciples that direct question: “Who do **you** say that I am?” Peter's answer was rightly: “You are the Messiah!”

But then Jesus began to make clear that his path as the Messiah involved suffering and death, and Peter couldn't accept that at all. He remonstrated with Jesus, who rebuked him, telling Peter that he had become a messenger of Satan. Yes: Jesus **must** die on a cross, and in fact to follow Jesus meant being willing to take up our cross, to be ready to suffer and even die for him.

But so soon afterwards, Jesus takes Peter, James and John up a mountain, where he and they can be quiet. There something extraordinary happens. The Messiah is transfigured before them. He is seen in all his glory. His clothing becomes dazzling white. His face shines like the sun. It is an overwhelming sight, a unique experience.

What does it mean? Not so much that Jesus receives some new degree of glory: rather that the glory that is rightly his, but has been hidden so that he can fulfil his earthly ministry, something of that glory is revealed in a moment of time. It's almost as if Jesus has only been seen through frosted glass: suddenly the window is raised for a little while, and Jesus can be seen as he really is, a dazzling and glorious figure. This Messiah who is to suffer rejection and pain and death, is in fact a figure of great glory.

But then the disciples realize that Jesus is not alone: there are two other people talking with Jesus – and it is clear to the disciples that they are Moses and Elijah. Moses the great lawgiver and leader of God's people. Elijah the pioneering prophet, who was expected to return to prepare the way of the Messiah. We can only guess how they recognized these great figures of old. And on that mountain Moses and Elijah, who represent the Law and the Prophets, great servants of the Old Covenant, give **their** testimony to Jesus the Messiah, to whom their ministries ultimately pointed.

What a wonderful privilege for these three apostles to bear witness to this unique conversation on the mountain! But as ever, Peter is ready to put his foot in his mouth. “Rabbi”, he says. “It is wonderful that we are here. I can construct three booths: one each for Moses and Elijah and for you.”

What was that all about? Mark tells us that Peter was so frightened that he didn't really know what to say. But the apostle did have something in his muddled mind! He was remembering the scriptures: the people of Israel had needed to live in tents as they travelled through the desert from Egypt to the Promised Land. There was an annual festival, the Festival of Booths, to keep that ancient memory in people's minds.

And Peter, for all his fear, had to do something to lengthen this moment, to extend this time. He didn't want to let go of this experience, and perhaps by constructing these three booths or shelters, he could keep this time with the three great ones going for longer.

Of course the idea was foolish. Very soon a cloud descended on them, the cloud which had symbolized God's presence amongst his people during the wilderness wandering. The cloud which expressed God's glory and his holiness. God's presence on the mountain was palpable, and it was overwhelming.

And then a voice came from the cloud. "This my Son, the beloved; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him." Moses and Elijah have come from God's kingdom to bear witness to Jesus the Messiah. And now the voice of God himself gives the divine imprimatur to the claims of the eternal Son. And in the process, he is making it clear that the program of suffering that Jesus has laid out to the disciples, the program which has caused them so much grief, is indeed **God's** program, the way that God's purposes will be fulfilled.

And what about Peter? Peter who needs to do something, but doesn't know what to do. Peter who thinks a building program might be the way forward. Peter whose mind is so restless and confused. What about Peter, who can't be still?

One simple command from the cloud: "**Listen to him!** Listen to Jesus. Listen to my Son." Of course Moses is important, but first of all, listen to Jesus. Of course, Elijah and the prophets are important; of course they point to Jesus; but above all, listen to Jesus."

And in an era when even those of us who are supposedly retired are actually very busy busy busy, God's message to Peter is surely a message to us as well. We need to have our ears and minds and hearts open to what Jesus is saying to us.

If we're too busy to listen to Jesus' message, perhaps we are too busy. If the noise is too loud to hear what Jesus is saying, we need to find a way to turn down the volume around us. The presence of Moses and Elijah gives eloquent testimony to Jesus, as Peter refers to this incident in our second reading this morning.

We do need to listen to the prophets, because they point to Jesus. We are not to discard them, or to try to make them say what **we** would like them to say, for they are God's chosen messengers, guided by God's Holy Spirit.

But it is the Father himself whose acknowledgement of his Son must above all be taken most seriously: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him." We need to take in the message of the scriptures.

Of course we have not had the opportunity like those disciples to see Jesus in his transcendent glory. Of course the other nine apostles themselves did not know what happened on the mountain until much later. This was not the time for such an experience to become public: it would have been misunderstood, and would have given ignorant people more reason to expect Jesus to go down the path of political or military power, rather than the path of humble and painful service. So the three apostles were told to hold onto this special experience and keep it to themselves.

We can still hear the voice of Jesus today, even if we do not see him in his transcendent glory. As we open the pages of our Bibles, may we seek not merely to read words of authority and truth, but pray that we may hear the voice of Jesus himself. As we come to services week by week, may we not only share in the liturgy and sit through a sermon or homily, but let us pray that we will hear the voice of Jesus himself. And as we go through the daily activities of life, may we be open to those other ways and those other people that Jesus might choose to speak to us.

May we be good listeners to Jesus: to have listening ears, listening minds, listening hearts. As the old hymn puts it:

"Master, speak, thy servant heareth,
waiting for thy gracious word,
waiting for thy voice that cheereth:
Master, let it now be heard.
I am listening, Lord, for Thee:
What hast thou to say to me?"

May we be ready to hear and respond to the voice of the Lord Jesus as he speaks to us today and every day. Amen.

Paul Weaver