

## Epiphany 6 (Ordinary time 2 (A))

Collect for Epiphany 6: Almighty God, grant that with our minds set always on your wisdom and love, we may pursue both in word and deed those things that are pleasing in your sight; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, world without end.

Exodus 24.12-18 - The Lord said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain and stay here, and I will give you the tablets of stone with the law and commandments I have written for their instruction."

<sup>13</sup> Then Moses set out with Joshua his aide, and Moses went up on the mountain of God. <sup>14</sup> He said to the elders, "Wait here for us until we come back to you. Aaron and Hur are with you, and anyone involved in a dispute can go to them."

<sup>15</sup> When Moses went up on the mountain, the cloud covered it, <sup>16</sup> and the glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai. For six days the cloud covered the mountain, and on the seventh day the Lord called to Moses from within the cloud. <sup>17</sup> To the Israelites the glory of the Lord looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain. <sup>18</sup> Then Moses entered the cloud as he went on up the mountain. And he stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights.

2 Peter 1.16-21 - For we did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. <sup>17</sup> He received honour and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."<sup>[a]</sup> <sup>18</sup> We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.

<sup>19</sup> We also have the prophetic message as something completely reliable, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. <sup>20</sup> Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation of things. <sup>21</sup> For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

Matt. 17.1-9 - After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. <sup>2</sup> There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. <sup>3</sup> Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.

<sup>4</sup> Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah."

<sup>5</sup> While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"

<sup>6</sup> When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. <sup>7</sup> But Jesus came and touched them. "Get up," he said. "Don't be afraid." <sup>8</sup> When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.

<sup>9</sup> As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, "Don't tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

Let us pray: Most High, glorious God, enlighten the darkness of our hearts and give us correct faith, certain hope, and perfect love, so that we may always and in all things act according to Your Holy Will. Through Christ our Lord, Amen.

<><>

As we come to the end of our journey through this season of Epiphany, our readings culminate in a major revelation as we reflect on what Scripture has made known to us of our Lord Jesus, as we prepare to begin our journey with Him through Lent.

Last week we considered Isaiah's description of Jesus as the *Servant of the Lord*, whom the LORD would make to be the Covenant for God's people on the day of salvation. Isaiah spoke of God's mercy + grace to those turning back to Him + returning from exile, turning mountains into paths, and providing for them on the way: His people would

neither hunger nor thirst as they made their way back from exile to the Holy City – which hints at Jesus' words in John's Gospel (Ch.6): *"I am the bread of life: whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst."*

Today's readings are the culmination of the narrative of Epiphany, as we realise that Jesus is not *merely* a Prophet, not *merely* the Servant of the LORD – however exalted even that title is, nor even *merely* Son of Man, but is none other than the incarnate Son of God. This ...changes ...everything for us.

I am minded of CS Lewis' oft-spoken quote: *"You must make your choice: either this man was, + is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him + kill him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet + call Him*

*Lord and God. But let us not come up with any patronising nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to."*

And so we come to our texts for today – the reading from Exodus telling the story of Moses climbing the Mountain of the Lord, where Yahweh God gave to him the Ten Commandments that he would take down to the waiting Israelites + make known to them the boundaries beyond which God's people could not stray; and then our reading from Matthew's Gospel recounting the occasion where Jesus took Peter, James & John up a mountain – we think Mount Tabor, which stands about 11 miles west of the Sea of Galilee. There, Yahweh God revealed to them Christ's glory as His Messiah.

On Sinai, amid the glory of God, Moses encountered the *written* law to the Israelites, whereas Peter, James & John encountered the Glory of God enveloping the Transfigured Jesus, *the living Word of God*, and the voice of God telling them, like at Jesus' baptism, *"This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"*

Some of you may know already that this is one of the few Gospel stories that is called to be read twice during most lectionary years. We get the story on the day of Transfiguration – commemorated by the Church on August 6th – and again on this last Sunday of the season of Epiphany. Obviously, to the compilers of the lectionary, this story must be pretty important to have it come up two times during every cycle of readings.

And it IS an important story - for many reasons. But frankly, while the Church has always recognized the *importance* of this story, explaining it has been somewhat more problematic. Theologians + biblical scholars are all over the map on what the seminal importance of this story might have been in Jesus' time, and they agree even less on the importance of the story to Christians today.

All that being said, I'd like to weigh in with an extension of the message that you've heard from this pulpit during the entirety of this Epiphany season; namely that, although we may often struggle in our *understanding* of God's ways in our lives, yet the abiding message of the season is that God **wants** to make Himself known; He **wants** us to seek after Him; + sometimes God's grace grants us

a glimpse or revealing of a **new** facet of His love + ways in our lives.

In the theology of Celtic spirituality, there are what are called "thin places," places where the curtain between our temporal realm + the realm of Heaven is so thin that we can see something of that Heavenly realm through it, if only in brief glimpses. Often, these places are places of deep + prolonged prayer, but they can also be occurrences in our lives.

And these occasions, when we get to glimpse a sense of God's face + grace through that thin curtain, cannot help but be agents of transformation, calling us to closer + deeper discipleship, if we will let them.

When Peter, James and John went up on the mountain with Jesus that day, they expected to sit with their Master while He prayed. They had done that before + they knew what

to expect. But...this day was different. When they got there, something so unexpected, so “other worldly” happened. It took them right out of their comfort zone and changed their lives. What happened on the mountain that day was a moment in which that encounter witnessed between Jesus, Moses + Elijah + God the Father, and the Father’s command to them, completely disclosed who + what He was to the disciples. In the blink of an eye, they became fully aware of the fact that they were looking into the face of God in all its grace and glory. That moment of Transfiguration, + the accompanying words from God the Father, declares that the rabbi Jesus - prophet, healer + companion, is none other than God present as fully human yet also still fully God to reconcile the world to God’s self.

According to Matthew, only six days beforehand, Peter had confessed that Jesus was “*the Christ, the Son of the living God*” – and then rebuked Jesus for saying to them that he was on his way to Jerusalem to suffer + die. But even Peter had not fully understood the import of his words: had no idea the implications of what he had said.

Let me illustrate with an outrageous story. And the most outrageous bit is that what I am about to tell you really happened.

This story concerns Larry Walters, a thirty-three year-old truck driver living in California. Larry had always wanted to fly, but because of his poor eyesight he never had the chance. It didn’t stop him dreaming though. He got the idea that he might be able to do something with some weather balloons, so he bought some, along with the helium to blow

them up, with the idea of experimenting in his neighbourhood.

On 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1982, Larry hooks up forty-five of these weather balloons onto his lawn chair. He puts on a parachute, attaches a six pack of beer to the chair in case he gets thirsty, sets a truck's walkie-talkie-style radio on his lap, ties a paper bag full of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to his leg, + slings a BB gun over his shoulder, with the idea that he can pop the balloons when he wants to come down. He secures his chair by some rope to his pick-up truck for an anchor, + then sits back + prepares for lift-off. He expects to rise a couple hundred feet and get a good view of his neighbourhood. However, the rope anchoring him to his truck snapped with the tension from the weather balloons, and he ascended quickly until he found himself

16,000 feet up (that's about 3 miles high. For context, Ben Nevis is a mere 4,413 feet high), and he found himself in the flight path to Los Angeles International Airport!

After 45 minutes up there, during which time he was buzzed by a couple of airliners, he decides it's time to come down again + starts popping some balloons with his BB gun, before dropping it by accident. Thankfully, he's popped enough to let gravity take over, and he slowly descends to the ground – but not before getting tangled up in some power lines + causing a black-out to a bunch of homes. He survived all this, but was immediately arrested by waiting Police. Regional safety inspector Neal Savoy was reported to have said, "We know he broke some part of the Federal Aviation Act, and as soon as we decide which part it is, some type

of charge will be filed. Larry was initially fined \$4,000 for violating Federal Aviation Regulations. He appealed, and the fine was reduced to \$1,500, after the charge of operating a civil aircraft without an airworthiness certificate was dropped, on the grounds that his garden chair was not listed as an applicable type of aircraft.

The point of the story? Larry – like Peter - had clearly not understood the import of his actions, and hadn't thought things through.

So: coming back to Peter + James + John + their encounter with the Transfigured Lord Jesus: what *did* they physically see with their eyes that day? We can't really tell from the description we get in Matthew, "*his face shone like the sun, + his clothes became dazzling white.*" I've got to be honest: that really doesn't tell me much about what it

looked like to see God's face. In fact, that's about as helpful in trying to imagine what they saw as it might have been to ask blind Bartimaeus to describe a sunset.

And I've no idea what was going through Peter's mind when he suggested making three booths for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. We know Peter was known for speaking first and thinking later. But really? Why would they need three booths: one for each of them? Did they not get on with each other or something?!

However, that's not the important bit. The important bit for us is twofold: firstly in knowing that God makes Himself known to us in little epiphanies all the time, because He wants to make Himself known to us – if we will but have eyes to see them; and secondly, that He may sometimes involve us

in little epiphanies for the benefit of those around us too.

So, as we end our journey through Epiphany, + remind ourselves that our Lord Jesus wants to make Himself known to us, and wants our hurting world to see more + more of His love + care for them too, let us open ourselves to the possibility that He can teach us His ways in the unexpected – and perhaps also even the uncomfortable - places of life – none more-so than in our upcoming journey with Him through Lent. Amen.