

The Transfiguration – Changing the World

PREACHER : The Very Revd Adrian Newman, Dean of Rochester

Rochester Cathedral
Sunday, August 6th 2006
10.30am Sung Eucharist

Luke 9 : 28-36

Today, 6 August, is Lord Tennyson's birthday. He would have been 197, if he had lived. It's also my mother's birthday. She's 87, and still very much alive and well. And it's Geri Halliwell's birthday too – Yes, Ginger Spice is 34 today. Even the young are getting old.....

But overshadowing all of these dates is another, much darker anniversary. On 6 August 1945 at 8.15am a small device was dropped from an aeroplane called 'Enola Gay', and in the space of a few short seconds 80,000 people died in a city called Hiroshima, with a further 120,000 dying from the fallout from that first atom bomb, codenamed 'Little Boy', over the months to come.

For many people Hiroshima and Nagasaki, along with the Nazi holocaust, signalled the death of God in the mind of the modern world.

These places, these dark and dreadful events, mark a steady drift away from belief. Today, belief in God is largely something for the edge of our lives, something nominal, something consigned to a small religious compartment of our lives, which rarely has any meaningful effect on the way we live. For a God who can simply stand and watch while 80,000 people are evaporated must either be the very devil himself or just a figment of our imagination.

I was reading an interview with the journalist Polly Toynbee recently, in which she said: *'there seem to me to be such fundamental problems with a God. It's terribly trite to say so but I cannot believe in a God that is both powerful and good. If he's good he wouldn't do these things to people, it's just common sense'*. And the interviewer goes on to say 'well, the Christian answer would be that God identified with human suffering in the crucifixion'. And Polly Toynbee's answer to that was *'yes, but how dare he create the suffering, I won't have it, I won't accept that people die horrible deaths through no fault of anybody's except Gods; if he's there'*.

Now it seems to me that this decision to write God out of the script has become a very powerful and insistent force in the modern world, but it's led to a terrible and unrecognised tension for everybody who inhabits the world today. On the one hand we want the world to be a better place, but at the same time we've decided that this world has no place for God. We've written God out of the script but we still want the story to have a happy ending.

And I have to say it simply doesn't work. Human beings left to their own devices do not have a good track record of peace and harmony and love and compassion. Look at the Middle East.

But ironically, 6 August is yet another anniversary of sorts. It marks the date on which the Church remembers the Transfiguration.

For 99% of the gospels we find a reassuringly normal picture of Jesus, a man with the same emotions, the same feelings, the same needs which all of us recognise within ourselves. But here, at the transfiguration,

for a few short minutes at the top of this mountain, Peter and James and John see Jesus in all the power, the glory and the majesty with which he was clothed in heaven before he took that amazing step out of eternity and into our time-bound existence.

Which makes the transfiguration something highly transformational. For it tells us that we are not alone. It reminds us that within all that is normal, all that is everyday, all that is dull and routine, the light and glory of Christ is wrapped in the unassuming mantle of things we do not normally recognise as divine. And just occasionally we'll catch a glimpse of it, and know that within the darkness of the world there is an abiding light that cannot be extinguished.

For the claim of Christianity, and truth of the Transfiguration, is that God's involvement in this world is far more radical than Polly Toynbee's magic-away-the-suffering God, the God who would have swooped down like Superman and caught the atom bomb in his kryptonite hands. Such a God makes a mockery of our humanity, treats us like toys – or worse still, robots with no moral responsibility and no ability to grow and develop.

No, the Christian God is one who comes and shares the suffering of the world, so that he can redeem it.

Jesus in all his glory stepped off the edge of eternity and risked everything when he jumped into the black hole of human existence. He came to us, became one of us, en-fleshed himself. And this great, glorious, wonderful man ended up nailed to a cross. Suffering, pain, death – where is your sting? You have been overpowered – from the inside.

Years ago, when we were travelling over to the United States with a much younger family than they are now, we sat in the wrong seats - all the amazing gadgetry meant to keep us entertained throughout the flight simply didn't work!

The steward who was looking after us got more and more embarrassed as everything steadily broke down in front of us. And to compensate he asked if the children would like to go up to the flight deck to meet the captain. Now for most of the time when you're flying long distances, you're crammed into this big flying bus and it's by no means clear that you're even moving let alone that anyone is in control of where you're going. And then for a few brief moments, Peter, Jack and Danny and I were there chatting with the pilot on the flight deck, surrounded by instruments, seeing with our own eyes the panoramic view which the captain gets. And as soon as you go there, you get a different perspective, you see the pattern of things previously unseen, and you know that you're in safe hands.

For most of life's journey God's presence is veiled, almost hidden. Everything seems dull, routine, and distinctly un-divine! Transfiguration is a glimpse of heaven, of God's glorious presence as one day we shall experience it. Now we see through a mirror dimly, then we shall see face to face.

And it makes sense in a strange way of suffering, not by pointing us to a God who can magic it all away, but by reminding us that the God of all glory has somehow redeemed suffering by sharing it with us.

Beneath the cloak of normality, if we take the time to look for him, is the glorious and transfigured Christ. Here to be with us, to stand alongside us and experience our greatest joys and our deepest sorrows, to share our pain, our struggles and our tears. Here for us to know, to love and to follow. Here to help us become more fully human than we ever imagined possible. Here to rescue us, and to lead us on to that place across the edge of eternity where we will one day see him face to face, and be with him for ever.