

ST ANDREW'S URC

11 FEBRUARY 2018 NEXT BEFORE LENT

TRANSFIGURATION SUNDAY

This Sunday is designated Racial Justice Sunday, Church Action on Poverty Sunday, the Sunday next before Lent. We have two substantial passages from scripture, the ascension of Elijah into heaven and the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain top. And so over the next three hours I will try to do justice to these themes, whilst the rest of you go and enjoy your Sunday lunch!

This city owes a huge debt to the work of Grace and John Vincent in the more deprived areas of Sheffield. I long remember inviting John to preach at one Ascension Day evening service at St Mark's when we had the story of the Transfiguration as our gospel text then. John in his own compelling style spoke of transfiguration and disfiguration. Transfiguration – the glory of Christ laid before his disciples, Rabbi how good it is to be here, says Peter. It's like being in heaven, so pure, so lovely, so peaceful. As Paul puts it in the Corinthians passage, light shines in the darkness – the summation of all our Epiphany themes – and that light can shine in our hearts as we inherit the mantle, as the spirit lights upon those gathered at Pentecost after the Ascension of Jesus. Transfiguration!

Before we taste of death,  
we see your kingdom come;  
we long to hold the vision bright,  
and make this hill our home.

We long to see your kingdom come, in other words we long to see transfiguration of our world.

But so often down on the plain, not on the hill- top we see disfiguration, disfigured lives blighted by racism, by poverty. In the last week I spent one day in Leeds and one day in Manchester, both cities I know pretty well. But I was struck afresh at how many people were to be seen sleeping in doorways, often in threes and fours, huddled together against this freezing cold. The leader of Windsor Council might feel that the streets of his historic town are disfigured by the number of rough sleepers but it is the lives of such men and women that are the real disfigurement.

Our world as we know is so disfigured in so many ways – the seas are polluted, the ozone layer continues to thin because of global warming, millions of refugees are fleeing from war and insecurity and whole nations like Afghanistan and Syria are totally disfigured by years of conflict. But one headline caught my eye this week and that is the story of a young man, Stephen, who when he was just 10 years of age and living in the streets of Hanoi was picked up by a gang of traffickers and brought illegally to England where he was held as a slave, living alone in a terraced house looking after cannabis plants and treated like an animal. At 16 he was arrested in a drugs raid and then taken into foster care. From then his life turned around. He was cared for by a clergyman and his wife in County Durham. He learnt English, went to college and now has turned 19. But the Home Office are now intending to send him back to Vietnam.

Disfiguration is what happens to people when others do not see in them the face of Christ. Stephen, that Vietnamese young man, is of course no less a child of God, than you and me. As this season of Epiphany draws to a close we remember the magnificent prologue of John's gospel – in Jesus the Christ of God was the light and life of God and that light enlightens every person who comes into the world. That is the good news for our world, that we, every one of us, has been given the light and love of God. Elisha saw that light in Elijah and wished for the same Spirit to rest upon him. The disciples saw the light of God in the face of Jesus of Nazareth. But in both cases, that of Elisha and that of the disciples there was work to be done back on the plain, back in the messiness of a disfigured world. In 2 Kings we read of Elisha helping a poor widow, healing enemies, aiding a refugee through his influence with the king of Israel. In the gospels and subsequently in the book of Acts we see how those early followers of Christ tried to put into practice the teachings and compassion of Jesus.

We know how costly can be the work of bringing transfiguration to a disfigured world. If it were easy we would not need to have a Racial Justice Sunday nor a Church Action on Poverty Sunday for our society would have made racism and poverty and war and gross inequality things of the past. But Jesus never promised that the task would be easy. Shortly after the story of the Transfiguration in Mark's gospel, the narrator begins the journey to Jerusalem, that Lenten journey we shall embark upon this week, when Jesus made it clear to his followers that the road would be arduous and the sacrifice great.

The Church and its members who dare to proclaim Jesus as Lord will have to fight the good fight over and over again. I don't know if Stephen will be allowed to stay in the UK or face life back in Hanoi. But I do know that thousands of people have seen the light and petitioned the Home office; I do know that Stephen has seen the love of Christ in the face of that couple in Durham who cared for him.

The post communion prayer in the Anglican church this week reads

*Holy God, we see your glory in the face of Jesus Christ. May we who are partakers at his table, reflect his life in word and deed, that all the world may know his power to change and save.*

In other words, that disfiguration may indeed be transfigured into a world nearer to the kingdom of God on earth.

Amen.