

In the name of the Father....

Today we come to the third part of our exploration of how God is manifest to humanity, or how God is shown to each of us and those who are around us. Two weeks ago we considered two different Call Narratives – the call of Samuel and the Call of Phillip and Nathanael - and what these tell us about how we encounter God. We were invited to recall those times and experiences when we have said to God ‘Speak Lord your servant is listening’.

Last week we took this thought further to look at the ways in which we engage with God. As fellow servants in the Kingdom of God, how do we work on developing our relationship with God? We talked about the importance of discernment and critical thought – and also about the accountability which our collective worship provides for us by its very structure.

Finally today I want us to consider the ways which we are Transformed by God. Our encounter with God transforms our view of the world and the way that we live within it – how we are enabled to become fully the people who God created.

Some of you may remember from last week, that one of the reasons our relationship with God is so important is because– ‘God has a picture in his heart of the person we are capable of becoming’ – our faith is about allowing this fulfilment to come true. The gift of God to us in Christ is that Jesus shows us how to be ourselves – how to be fully human with all the complexities which come with this. This means that as individuals and as a community we are constantly changing and growing. Jesus incarnation – the coming of the divine nature into human form - Jesus gives us a glimpse of the possibility of the heavenly kingdom and also of the Kingdom of God here on earth – when we all the fully the people that God has created.

Today’s gospel reading gives us a stark example of this potential. Jesus is in Capernaum (another city in Galilee). You may remember that Galilee was known for its thieves, rebels, and Gentiles. So once again Jesus sets the scene for a miracle set outside the chosen people. Jesus is working outside the boundaries. The second expression of this is that the story takes place on the Sabbath – a day of rest and worship – not a day any kind of work include healing! The next thing to note in this story is that Jesus speaks with authority – this was new for the disciples. Jesus held both love and authority together – in a new way – not like the scribes.

Scribes were originally the people who copied the scriptures. They became experts in the law and their authority came from their detailed understanding of scriptures and tradition. The Scribes authority was based on their ability to recite the opinion of many Rabbis on a given topic but Jesus was different – he had authority because when he spoke, things

changed! An encounter with the authority Jesus would result in transformation.

So here we have Jesus, amongst the gentiles, on the Sabbath – commanding authority which seems not to have been experienced before -when a man possessed comes into the synagogue announcing who Jesus is ‘the Holy One of God’ – and demanding to know his purpose. It is very powerful scene to imagine – or even witness. The violent anger of this man yelling at Jesus amidst the worship and teaching – and Jesus brings him to silence. There is a lot that we can take from this story about Jesus authority over evil and his desire to transform the world and each of us. But it is also important to note that the ‘evil’ in this story recognised that authority of Jesus as soon as he saw and heard him.

When we meet Jesus, at a time of conversion or in our ongoing relationship with him, we meet this same authority. Similarly there will be elements of our lives or situation which may scream out – what do you want with me? Sometimes this response is out of anger or fear; sometimes it is about uncertainty or even indifference. When we meet the authority of Jesus in our faith relationship we know things change – and sometimes we may not want to!

Our transformation in faith is not, like our encounter with God, a one off occurrence – for us to truly be the people that God created us to be we need to be open to the transforming power of God each day of our lives. We are transformed because we no longer live by the priorities of this world or this society but by the values of the Kingdom of God. Values which revolve around God’s love for us! As a community we have made this our priority – our mission tag is ‘offering God’s love to all’ – the desire of our community is that we will be a community to works hard at demonstrating the power of God’s transforming love each day of our lives – as individuals and as a community. It is this love which continues to transform each of us, and we want others to have the opportunity to have the same experience.

In the reading that we heard from the letter to the Romans, Paul is addressing this very question in the early church. Do not conform Paul says – but be transformed! Discern the will of God and respond to its authority – we are called to live out what is good and acceptable and perfect in God’s sight. This means our minds and our lives will be renewed in our worship and in our service of God.

In this letter, Paul is doing more than focusing on a common goal or asserting a common value. He is talking about the way we shape our lives. Paul never saw being a Christian as a life membership rather as entry into a relationship and growth in that relationship. Paul is always thinking about what shapes people's lives. Paul is addressing an issue of his day – which is also an issue of ours - there are many people who count themselves as Christian, but are shaped by the prevailing values of those around them in a way that undoes anything that Christ might have wanted in their lives. They

reflect particular national, political or social values, sometimes not even knowing they stand under such influence. They can even call some of these values "Christian". But there is no engagement with what is at the heart of Christ's message.

Paul knows about shaping. He urges the Romans to engage in a process whereby they are shaped not by the prevailing fashions of the age but by Christ. It is in that sense a counter cultural renewal to which he calls the Romans. The renewing of one's mind - stance, attitudes; perspective - is the basis not only for individual wholeness but also for a healthy community or congregation. This is what being transformed by Christ is all about – each decision, each purpose, each value of our life is informed by our relationship with Christ. The challenge is however that there is no set of rules which we can import in to show us how to do this rather it has to be about total transformation and faith in Christ.

That is why Paul says that the law (the commandments) are not very effective in changing people and tends to produce the opposite. Rather transformation comes through a process of renewal which changes people's attitudes - and from that process of transformation changed behaviour flows. It is relationship based, not rule based – and grows out of a developing discernment about God's will and openness to change.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul guides us to maturity in faith, based on believing the gospel of love and grace which sets people free from needing to achieve their self worth at the cost of others. When we are free from the obsession with establishing our own importance we can then see ourselves for who we are. That includes identifying our gifts and abilities and understanding where they and we fit in. But again this is not about some kind of labelling exercise where we are boxed into a spiritual gift that we must use for the good of ourselves and others – it is about a growing relationship of discernment – the daily act of transforming our thinking, believing and behaving.

I wonder how many of your have seen any of the Shrek movies? These modern fairy tales tell the story of an Ogre – Shrek who is forced to go and rescue a beautiful princess – however all anyone can see is that he is an Ogre. He does rescue the princess and they fall in love – and there are many jokes about how an Ogre might have feelings, or relationships. The princess has a secret however she is also an ogre by night and it is promised at the kiss of her first love she will be transformed into her full beauty and no longer one thing by day and by night another! The twist in this story however that is when she does have that kiss and she is transformed she appears to be an Ogre and she is a beautiful Ogre! She becomes the strong warm and powerful woman she was created to be – but it is not what we might expect. The princess is transformed into her True Self - not necessarily beautiful in the eyes of the "world", but beautiful in a more important reality.

And so it is with our transformation in faith – it is not that we may become Ogre’s – or that we may not be beautiful in the world’ eyes – rather that we need to be open to what transformation in Christ means – the daily assessment of our lives in the context of our Christian faith.

Being a Christian is much more than simply coming to Church on a Sunday or even saying that we believe in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Lots of people claim to be Christian but an external observer would be hard pressed to find evidence of their claim in the person’s daily and weekly routine.

If I had one pound for each person who said that they didn’t need to come to church to be Christian I would be a wealthy woman! But the reality is this statement is false. ‘Being Christian’ is not about being good or virtuous (though it should lead to that); and there are good and virtuous people outside the Church and bad and sinful people within it. Christian life is lived in relationship with God through Jesus Christ, and in common with other Christians in the church seeking to deepen that relationship and to follow the way that Jesus taught.

Being Christian is about fulfilling the requirements of faith as Jesus commands and that includes regular worship, regular prayer and a serious attempt to live a holy and dedicated life guided by the teachings of Christ. Each of us has to make our own pattern in life as we try to follow Jesus, and this pattern, this dedication transforms our lives!

When Jesus came to earth born as a child in a manger – God became manifest – made know to all the earth. God sent his son that we might have a glimpse of the divine within our humanity. This very act of the incarnation took place that each of us – as individuals and as community – might come to have an experience of God, that we might engage with these experiences and most importantly that we and the entire earth might be transformed by God.

Next week we end this Epiphany season with the feast of candlemas – when Jesus is presented in the temple and Simeon proclaims ‘my eyes have seen the glory of the Lord – the light a revelation to all people’. We are living proof of this vision – the ongoing life of the Christian community 2000 years later. And for this Kingdom to continue we must have the courage to live out our faith each day – to ask is this decision informed by Christ? Is my life defined by love of Christ – and am I accepting that Christ loves me. And as a community let us truly transform this world as we offer God’s love to all!

Amen.

