

Two mountain tops; is anybody listening?

“This is my Son, the Beloved, he enjoys my favour. Listen to him.” The voice emanating from the bright cloud is clearly meant to produce an effect. Notice how it cuts across what Peter is thinking and saying in a way that essentially commands us to stop what we are doing, saying or thinking and pause. What though are we being asked to think about? What is our listening supposed to produce?

Last week in the gospel reading we heard that Jesus was led up a high mountain by the devil and that he was made an offer. “Look at all this” Satan said. “Feast your eyes on all this splendour and wealth, all this power and authority. You can have it all if you want it, provided you do one thing - and that’s worship me.” Jesus will have nothing to do with it. “Be off Satan” he exclaims. This week the story has moved on a pace and Jesus is again up a mountain and something momentous is about to take place.

In the time between the two incidents much has taken place. Jesus has begun his ministry, he has called his disciples and through his words and deeds has spoken to them of the unfolding presence of the kingdom of God. Yet they have been slow to comprehend, unable as it were, to grasp the significance of it all. In spite of the teachings and the parables, in spite of the healings and exorcisms they remain unaware. Ultimately Jesus puts it to them: “Who do people say I am?” Peter answers “You are the Christ”, but when Jesus spells out in clear, unambiguous language what that phrase means, Peter is horrified. “This mustn’t happen to you” and Jesus’ response? “Get behind me Satan”.

So Jesus has explained the meaning of the cross to them and still found them wanting, still not listening, still unable to break the ties which shackle them to the prospect and ambition of earthly honour and wealth. Jesus takes them up the mountain and the transfigured person they see before them is the image of what letting go of the prospects of earthly power looks like. Remember we are in Lent, when our thoughts are attuned to stripping ourselves of that which configures us to worldly needs so that we may more understand and accept the call to configure our lives to spiritual needs. In this Lenten journey of ours we are confronted with a basic reality: *what then will anyone gain by winning the whole world and forfeiting his life?* Here on this mountain top is the answer; listen to him. This is why the voice from the cloud cuts across Peter. It is telling him that what matters most of all, above and beyond anything else, outweighing any of our own schemes and ambitions, is Jesus. When finally the disciples look up, all they see is Jesus.

Why then is the cross the key which unlocks the mystery of the transfiguration? Because the cross tells us that Jesus’ death is the greatest expressive outpouring of human love. It shows us that only through Jesus can we truly come to know God; just as only in Jesus can we truly come to know our own humanity. There is nothing heroic about the cross, nothing majestic or daring. But it is the only way in which we come to understand that phrase “get behind me Satan” because it places our lives in a context and calls upon us to strive for a vision of hope which is both transforming and transfiguring.