

## Shining some light on truth

A sermon by John Parr at St Mary's Hadleigh, February 26<sup>th</sup> 2017

What do you see in this image? What you think it might be?



It's the first of a series of 10 'inkblots' devised by a Swiss psychologist Hermann Rorschach in 1921. He used them as a way of understanding human personality. He asked his subjects what they saw in the image, what they thought it might be, and he used what they said to help him to understand them.

Rorschach's inkblots have been used in psychological testing ever since, often as part of job interviews. They're highly controversial, as you'd expect. Some swear by them, others see them as unreliable and subjective: they tell us more about the tester, say the critics, than the person being tested.

What is hard to dispute, though, is that what we see in these images is more than our eyes tell us. We don't just see with our eyes. Something in us – our experience, our beliefs, our culture – helps to shape our vision.

Today's gospel (Matthew 17.1-9) is an account of a vision. We often call it 'the Transfiguration'. Jesus takes his three closest disciples, Peter, James and John, up a mountain, and what they see takes them completely by surprise. Jesus' face is as bright as the sun, his clothes become dazzling white, and two figures appear and talk with him. The disciples recognise them as Elijah and Moses. They want to build shelters for them,

but then a cloud overshadows them all, and they hear a voice from heaven: “This is my Son, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him”.

This is obviously an important event, because the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke include it, in almost identical versions. And it is referred to in today’s epistle (2 Peter 1.16-21). The author and his companions were ‘eyewitnesses of Jesus’ majesty’ on the holy mountain, and they ‘heard the voice that came from heaven’. Today’s readings tell us what they saw. I wonder what shaped their vision.

What did you ‘see’ in Thursday’s by-election results when they were reported the day after? The end of UKIP, a ringing endorsement of the Prime Minister’s approach to Brexit, the leader of the Labour Party as an electoral liability? The triumph of a candidate who was aware of local employment issues in Cumbria, and the defeat of one in Stoke who was less than honest – or was he the victim of Labour smears?

The way something in us shapes what we see going on around us certainly keeps journalists and news presenters in work. It encourages lively debate and disagreement in the search for truth. We soon learn that truth is elusive, mysterious, contested. ‘Seeing is believing’, we say. But there is more to believing than simply seeing with our eyes.

If you and I had been there on the holy mountain, would we have seen and heard the same as Peter, James and John? That’s a tantalising question. What they saw was shaped by their culture, their faith, their hopes as Jewish people under the Roman occupation, their Scriptures.

Scriptures that told them about holy men like Moses and Elijah who met God on cloud-covered mountain tops. Moses’ face glowed so much that he had to cover it when he came down (Exodus 34.29-35). The prophet Daniel had a vision of a heavenly figure whose clothes were dazzling white (Daniel 7.9). Ezekiel’s overwhelming experience of the glory of God was like bright light and fire (Ezekiel 1.13, 26).

In one of the psalms used at the enthronement of the king, a prophet spoke on behalf of God to the newly-crowned ruler: “you are my son, today I have begotten you” (Psalm 2.7). In the writings of Isaiah, God calls the servant who brings good news of his people’s release from captivity, “my chosen one, in whom my soul delights” (Isaiah 42.1).

If we put Rorschach’s questions to Peter, James and John – ‘what do you see in this man? who might he be?’ – their account of the transfiguration would tell us. ‘This Jesus – by now, on his way to execution – is where the bright shining light of heaven comes down to earth. This Jesus – who calls his followers to take up their cross and follow him if they really want to come alive – is where God speaks his most life-giving and liberating words. Listen to him’.

Why is the Transfiguration important for us today? A ten-year-old pupil in a church school asked his teacher, ‘what is the difference between Judaism, Christianity and Islam?’ Today’s epistle and gospel underline the fundamental Christian belief that Jesus reveals ‘the truth’. For many Christians, the answer to the child’s question is quite simple: Christianity holds the truth, other religions don’t.

But truth is more complex. What we see is more than our eyes alone tell us. Our perceptions of truth are more fluid than fixed. Now this is a long way from the spin doctors who worked with the Blair government, and the 'fake news' that pops up on Google and Facebook, and the lies that populate some politicians' rhetoric and social media. These manipulators and despisers of truth have certainly shaken our confidence. We shouldn't allow them to convince us that there is no such thing as truth. But we should also be wary of taking refuge in the opposite idea that truth is obvious and straightforward.

Look again at today's readings, with their vision of Jesus as heaven touching earth. Peter calls us to pay attention to him 'as to a lamp shining in a dark place' (2 Peter 1.19). A 'lamp', Peter says, not a container. The transfiguration is not an image of Jesus holding every bit of truth in himself. Jesus is the bright, dazzling light of heaven, whose truth illuminates the whole of creation. What is this saying to us?

Over the winter I've had to rely a lot on my headlights when I drive here early or travel home late. Headlights are not like the streetlights where I live, that give everything a yellow colourwash. My headlights' intense white light shines with all the colours of the spectrum, so that I can see reds and blues and browns and greys, even in the dark.

If Jesus is like a lamp in dark place, then his bright, dazzling light shines the whole spectrum of God's glory and life out into the world. What does that spectrum include? Love for God and neighbour and foreigner and enemy, the call to prayer and compassion and forgiveness, justice and a place for all, living sacrifice, hope in the face of every kind of death, the renewal of the whole of life.

The Transfiguration is a vision of 'Jesus-coloured light' that reveals the whole spectrum of God's truth. What it reflects back to us as it shines into the world often surprises and challenges us. We see shades of truth where we don't always expect to find them. I'm tempted to ask another question alongside the one from the ten-year old: 'what do Judaism, Christianity and Islam have in common? How do they and their followers relate to each other – and those who claim to have no faith?'

'This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Listen to him. Pay attention to him, as you would to a lamp shining in a dark place'. I wonder how Jesus-coloured light can help us to make a world in which people who see truth quite differently can learn to live together faithfully, responsibly and safely?

We never see with our eyes alone. Something in each one of us shapes our vision of truth. That's why life will always be full of debate and disagreement. And why it's vital to pay attention, to listen, to learn how to live what we see: the world bathed in the whole spectrum of intense, dazzling Jesus-coloured light.