Address for Eucharist at Mount Tabor

My father used to have a very characteristic expression. When he had had a couple of glasses of wine, and was in conversation on some topic about which he felt strongly, he would say, ‘I’m beginning to see things very clearly now’. Our gospel reading today is Matthew’s account of Jesus’s transfiguration: a turning point in his gospel as well as those of Mark and Luke. For it is here on the mountain when Jesus is transfigured that the disciples start to see things very clearly.

First of all, and most importantly, the transfiguration shows *Jesus* clearly. In this extraordinary experience, the disciples glimpse for the first time the full reality of who he is. Up to this point, they have known him as a friend, a rabbi, a teacher. But on the holy mountain, they gain a glimpse of his full dimensions. His face shining like the sun would have made them see him as a new Moses whose face shone on his descent from Mount Sinai (Ex 34.29-30). And the presence with Jesus of Moses – who brought the ten commandments – and the prophet Elijah would have indicated that Jesus fulfils the law and the prophets. But more than this, in the transfigured Jesus, shining with divine light, they encounter the fullness of God himself made visible. It’s as though the resurrection has already happened and they are experiencing in advance the fullness of glory that it will reveal.

Secondly, the transfiguration shows *the world* clearly. The disciples see a vision of glory. What is around them is not changed but it is transfigured. Everything remains the same and yet it is all different. It’s as if all the familiar things around them have suddenly been shot through, lit up, irradiated with the glory of God. What once seemed very ordinary has now become extraordinary. They see how the everyday world is not just what one modern philosopher calls a ‘brute fact’. Rather, each person, each place, each thing within it, completely radiates God’s glory if we have eyes to see it. Think for example of a well-loved object in your home, or a special landscape or the face of someone you love. All of these things and countless others are full of glory and beauty. So, in a certain sense, the disciples on the holy mountain are perhaps not seeing anything new, but rather seeing clearly for the first time what was there in its true reality; always just in front of their faces.

Finally I think they start to see *themselves* clearly. I am always rather amused by Peter’s suggestion at the transfiguration: shall we build three booths, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah? What he says may relate to the Jewish feast of tabernacles or Sukkot. This is a seven-day period each year when observant Jews build and live in small houses to remind them of the fragile dwellings in which they camped on their way through the wilderness to the Promised Land. But Peter’s suggestion always seems to me an example of a very human reaction to something big that is going on, our instinct can be to try and control it, to domesticate it, make it safe, bring it down to size. But Peter’s effort to do that is abruptly halted when a voice from heaven interrupts him to say, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him’. So perhaps Peter at this moment starts also to see *himself* more clearly: how futile is the temptation to try and bring God down to size.

At this early point on our pilgrimage, the transfiguration invites us into a new clarity of vision; to be alert to the glory of God as we see it in the face of Jesus Christ and in the world around us, and just to stay with it, without trying to organise it or control it. And, as we do so, to start ourselves to be transfigured by what the disciples so clearly experience on the holy mountain: the love and light and grace of God in Christ; his promise and his gift.