

**St. Ninian's Parish Church**  
**Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2019**

*Exodus 34: 29 – 35; Luke 9: 28 - 36*

'About eight days after this conversation...'<sup>1</sup> What conversation? Our reading from the Gospel of Luke this morning began with the words, 'About eight days after this conversation...' That phrase sounds like the writer is linking two events, 'About eight days after this conversation Jesus took Peter, John and James with him and went up in to the hills to pray.'

If we are going to understand the significance of what happens in the hills during this prayer, we need to know what the conversation was about that preceded their journey in to the hills. Fortunately, we know what it was about. The verses preceding the story of the Transfiguration, which we read this morning, say,

*And to all Jesus said, "If anyone wishes to be a follower of mine, he must leave self behind; day after day he must take up his cross, and come with me. Whoever cares for his own safety is lost; but if a man will let himself be lost for my sake, that man is safe."<sup>2</sup>*

Seventy miles down the east coast from Edinburgh is the Holy Island of Lindisfarne. There are many good reasons to visit Lindisfarne: it is beautiful; it is steeped in history; a visit requires a bit of an adventure because you have to drive across a tidal causeway to get to the island. About one car a month becomes stranded on the causeway because the driver left it too late to cross before the tide turned.

But, if you are careful when you visit then you'll be fine. However, because Lindisfarne is steeped in the history and significance of Christianity in north Britain, you could choose to ignore the causeway – after all it was only built in 1954 - and instead walk to the island across the sands along the route known as the Pilgrim's Way, the way pilgrims have been doing since the year 635.

I don't want to make too much of this, but if you did visit and if you did take the Pilgrim's Way then the crossing might feel a bit like a metaphorical walk for a follower of Jesus: you would be leaving the causeway behind; you would be taking up your cross; you would be going with Jesus; you would be putting yourself in danger of being lost.

To help you make this walk on your pilgrimage to the holy island there are tall posts set in to the sand to direct your journey. You need these because the east coast of north Briton is beautiful, but it can also be very misty, a haar can roll in off the North Sea. If that happened while you were crossing to

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 9: 28

<sup>2</sup> Luke 9: 23 - 24

Lindisfarne, you might lose your way and you could find yourself in a lot of trouble.

The posts aren't the only things there to help your crossing. There are also refuges along the way that offer shelter if you find yourself stranded on the sands when the tide comes in. It is also helpful, if you are crossing the sands in a haar with the mist all around you, if - even for a moment - the haar happens to lift and you are lucky enough to gain a vision of where you are going, the island.

If you are a pilgrim then a vision of your goal, of where you are heading to, is encouraging; it strengthens your resolve; it reassures you that you are on the right path.

We here at St. Ninian's are pilgrims about to begin a journey. Next Sunday is the first Sunday of the six Sundays of Lent. Lent is our annual pilgrimage, following in the footsteps of Jesus, that we make to the crucifixion.

Throughout these six weeks there are posts along the way: familiar stories, for example; Bible Studies; the Lenten discipline provided by Christian Aid that you can pick up. These posts help us to stay on the path because after all faith can often be foggy; sometimes it is difficult to see where we are going or to remember why we are going the way we are going.

On this Sunday, the Sunday before we start this Lenten pilgrimage, we have a vision to encourage us, to strengthen our will, to reassure us that this is a pilgrimage worth taking, that despite the fog and the risks that following Jesus on the pilgrim way present, nevertheless there is a glorious goal. This vision – the Transfiguration - is a lifting of the fog of our faith to reveal the true substance of Jesus' divine nature.

'And while he was praying the appearance of his face changed and his clothes became dazzling white.'<sup>3</sup> Although this transfiguration, this glorification of Jesus' body, sounds a little like the Resurrection of Jesus, it is not the Resurrection. They are different things. One takes place before the start of his journey to Jerusalem begins, while the other takes place after that journey has been completed.

Over the past few weeks we have been reading Paul's first letter to the members of the church in Corinth. While doing that we have reflected on the meaning of the resurrection in our lives. Paul compared the Resurrection to a seed that is transformed in to a plant. The Resurrection is a transformation, a transformation of the deceased Jesus that reveals his divinity.

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<sup>3</sup> Luke 9: 29

The Transfiguration, however, is not the transformation of someone deceased, for Jesus was still alive when it took place. It is more of a revelation of his divinity than a transformation of it. Who he really is, shines through his humanity, his living body, to reveal itself in order to encourage, strengthen and reassure his disciples who will travel with him on his journey to Jerusalem, and to encourage, strengthen and reassure us, who will follow as pilgrims on that journey.

The Transfiguration provides an answer to the first question any pilgrim asks, 'where are we going?' We are going to a place where we will see Jesus transformed in glory. But, what about the second question any pilgrim should ask before he or she steps out on to the sands and in to the fog of faith with only a few posts to guide your way and strengthened only by a vision of the place you are traveling to, 'why are we going there?'

'Why are we going there,' is an important question to ask for if you don't know why you are making a journey, you are much more likely to get lost on that journey. And anyway, Jesus himself asked that very question at the Transfiguration before he set off on his journey to Jerusalem. Unlike the disciples who were with Jesus at the time, we shouldn't sleep through what happened on that mountain. Here is what happened.

*Suddenly there were two men talking with Jesus; there was Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, the destiny he was to fulfil in Jerusalem. Meanwhile Peter and his companions had been in a deep sleep.<sup>4</sup>*

Had they not been sleeping we might know more about the conversation Jesus had with Moses and Elijah, but they were asleep, and we don't. Fortunately, though we know one thing. We know that Jesus, Moses and Elijah spoke of Jesus' 'departure'. Luke says that they '*spoke of his departure, the destiny he was to fulfil in Jerusalem.*

If you have access to the internet, you can watch a very neat and very short film dramatizing this story of the Transfiguration using Lego. In it everything is made out of Lego: the hilltop; Jesus, Moses, Elijah and the disciples; even the cloud is made out of Lego. It is only a minute and a half long, and while the Lego pieces are moved around dramatizing the action, the narrator reads the passage from the Bible that we read this morning.

Except the narrator doesn't read exactly what we read, for, rightly, when he comes to the word 'departure', he doesn't translate that word from its original Greek as our Bibles have done. For a very good reason, he uses the Greek word that in the version of our Bibles is translated as 'departure'. That Greek

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<sup>4</sup> Luke 9: 30 – 32a

word is *exodus*. Jesus, Moses and Elijah spoke of his *exodus*. Where have you heard that word before?

Exodus is the title of the second book of the Old Testament and that book tells the story of the Israelites following Moses on their journey from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land; their *exodus*.

If resurrection is about the transformation of our human bodies and our human nature, and if transfiguration is a revelation of the divine nature of Jesus, then *exodus* is about liberation. The purpose of the journey Jesus took to Jerusalem and the crucifixion, and the pilgrimage we are taking by following in his footsteps over the next 6 Sundays, is for liberation; that is why we make this journey.

In Jesus Christ God loves the world so much that he became so vulnerable to the world that he was crucified. But he was then transformed through the Resurrection to demonstrate that not even death can defeat the power of love to save us, to liberate us from all that would prevent us from living life in all its fulness.

By following in the footsteps of Jesus as pilgrims we too experience liberation. And in the event immediately following the Transfiguration we see the liberation of Jesus linked to the liberation of people. In the cloud a voice said, *"This is my son, my Chosen; listen to him."* Then, when Jesus came down from the mountain, a man in the crowd said, "Master, look at my son, I implore you, my only child." And, Jesus healed the child.

Just as God liberates Jesus, transforming him through the Resurrection, so God will liberate us, transforming our lives if we follow him on the way of the cross as pilgrim disciples.

As we begin this pilgrim journey of liberation, we have sight of the glory of transformation that lies before us – the revelation of Jesus' divinity shining through his earthly body at the Transfiguration. We do this, this year, on the Sunday when also we celebrate communion; when we gather together as the body of Christ to share bread and wine as a memorial of Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

As we do so, amongst us, between us and within each one of us, may the glory of God's vulnerable, sacrificial love, which liberates our lives, be revealed in this Communion that we celebrate together. And, may this glory sustain you in the weeks to come as you seek the spiritual transformation that sets you free from all that has the power to crush your soul.