Sunday next before Lent – Experiencing the presence of Jesus

In recent weeks, I have spoken about Jesus choosing His disciples and setting about His ministry. His first closest friends were working men. They were good Jews, they were hard-headed men, but they were sure that Jesus really was the Messiah promised in the scriptures.

If you think about it, that was quite something. The long-promised Messiah didn't come on the scene with a bang.

There were no trumpets, no newspaper headlines. He didn't drop down from the skies. He stole in on the scene as we remember it in the Christmas story.

Born in poverty in a stable; harassed by the Jewish police; He became a refugee in Egypt; then grew up in the anonymity of Nazareth, His parents’ home village.

For these hard-working men to have latched on to Jesus as the Messiah is astonishing. They had grown up to believe that God would bring forward, from generations of Jews, one who would be His representative here on earth. His task would be to bring back to God a world which had lost its way. To restore love of God and love of neighbour. To bring in a time of peace and justice for all people.

Those were the aims of the leaders in Jewish history - people like Moses, the prophet Elijah, and the great King David. But they had failed. Now the vision would be taken up by the Messiah. That was the promise given in scripture.

So, Mark's gospel draws a series of pictures of Jesus. We see Jesus at work. Moving around the area between His home and the Sea of Galilee. It's all done very quietly. There are no billboards announcing the coming of a Messiah. No men with sandwich boards touting for business. Jesus not even dressed as a rabbi, but going about rubbing shoulders with ordinary people. As He talks, He teaches about God. As He comes upon human need, so He ministers to it. He is noticed as a man who speaks the word of God, and does the word of God for individuals.

That is drawing power. It attracts others to join Him. The snowball begins to roll and grow.

**Everybody is asking who is this Jesus of Nazareth?**

**Jesus**tells His friends that He doesn't want them to use the title Messiah. He doesn't use it Himself, but sometimes speaks of Himself as Son of man. He just wants to be seen and known as a rabbi. Clearly this puzzles His disciples. So, He decides to do something about it - and this is the story of the Transfiguration.

Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up into the hills. As they stand taking in the view, Jesus seems to change. His clothes become dazzling white. There is a strange radiance about Him. He is joined by Moses and Elijah. The disciples are frightened - this is something they've never seen before. Peter blurts out about making three tents for them but, even as He says it, the scene changes. Moses and Elijah disappear and Jesus is left alone with His friends. They saw Jesus glorified, we would say, wrapped in a cloud. And a voice from the cloud said "This is my beloved son. Listen to Him".

That experience proved to them that He was as human as they were, but at the same time He was special. He was the Messiah.

As they came down from the hills, Jesus told them they must treasure what they had seen, and not talk about it until after His resurrection. It seems they kept His word.

It's true of most people who have a moving spiritual experience that they treasure it. They are not keen to talk about it. Whatever the experience was, it was so personal and intimate they want to guard it and keep it to themselves. To mention it to others is often to risk being regarded as an oddity, or to be said to have "got religion".

We might be surprised to know that many people have a variety of religious experiences. I mention just one, which might be of interest to you for Lent, starting next Wednesday.

It is the experience of feeling our Lord very close and very near. One of the regular tried and tested things to do daily in Lent is to set apart a time for quiet. Sit in a comfortable chair. Shut out noise and distractions. Read or reflect on a favourite bible story of Jesus. See yourself there in the story. Remember that as Jesus was there, so He is here with you now. Enjoy that sense of His being present with you. He is enfolding you in His love and concern. Time doesn't matter. If you fall asleep it doesn't matter. When you come to, just say a thank you to Him.

A simple thing to do. But well worth doing and persisting with it.

For the disciples, the Transfiguration of Jesus was a defining moment in their lives.

For you and me, one simple thing to do this coming Lent could be a defining moment in our lives.

Give it a try.