

## **The Transfiguration: All Saints Rome 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary**

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ, Dear Ecumenical Guests, Dear Friends, it is a real joy to be with you as we celebrate together a great and historic day in the life of All Saints Rome. We are celebrating 200 years of Anglican worship in Rome. And in 200 years, haven't you changed! At the beginning of the nineteenth century Anglican worship was forbidden in this city and took place only behind closed doors. In 1816, the first public Anglican Eucharist was celebrated. Papal permission for worship was eventually and reluctantly granted, but police guarded the entrances to services – presumably to make sure that local Romans were not tempted to take part. It was all very English and no doubt a bit esoteric.

Today All Saints Rome has this fine building, an international congregation with people of twenty different nationalities and a diverse range of worship. You have Sunday Schools, adult education programmes, charity and mission commitments and - along with our other Anglican churches in Italy - state recognition. You have a woman priest. And today, His Holiness Pope Francis comes to visit All Saints: the first pontifical visit ever to an Anglican parish in Rome. Haven't you changed!

How appropriate then, that our Bible readings today take us to that great moment of change in the life of our Lord: the event of the Transfiguration. Jesus goes up to a high mountain, traditionally the spectacularly shaped Mount Tabor, his clothes become a dazzling white and his face shines like the sun. The accompanying disciples hear the voice from heaven: 'This is my beloved Son; with him I am well pleased: listen to him.' Jesus's shining clothes and shining face disclose his *holiness*, the holiness of one who can stand without fear in his father's presence, who comes as a messenger from the Father, who embodies in his person the Father's grace and truth.

It is a strictly private event – just Jesus and his three closest disciples. Which perhaps leaves us wondering: so what about us? What of those others of his disciples, who come afterwards. How do we access or relate to these events taking place on a high mountain?

In fact, the word 'transfigure' or *metamorphothi* in Greek, is used in two other important places in the New Testament, both times referring to the lives of Jesus followers. In Romans 12, at a crucial point in his argument, St. Paul addresses the Christian Church saying: 'Do not be confirmed any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed, metamorphosed, by the renewing of your minds'. Then in 2 Corinthians 3 Paul says: "and we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed, *metamorphosed*, into his likeness with ever-increasing glory.

The point is that the transfiguration of Jesus provides a model and pattern for our lives too. The goal and programme of the Christian life, of fully human life, is a transformation of our very selves after the pattern of Jesus. Not of course literally, with white clothes and shining faces – that would be a lack of imagination - but in terms of proximity to God and in terms of *holiness*. We each of us, are called to engage in discipleship – to be a follower and a learner – which entails change: indeed a complete transformation that engages our mind, our will and our heart.

That is why worship is so important, because it is in worship that the disposition of our hearts is changed. Worship is, in one sense, trying to do something which is impossible: to facilitate the encounter of us human beings with God. It is in the depths and intimacy of that personal encounter that our hearts can be changed in the most fundamental way. And it is the way too, that Christian communities are changed.

As we meet together to confess our sins, receive forgiveness, offer praise, share peace and intercede for each other and the world, so something quite awesome begins to take place: the heart or ethos of a whole community of people is formed and transformed after the pattern of Jesus.

Because worship is the crucible in which transformation takes place, it is not surprising that developments in relations between separated church communities take place most especially when we worship together. 100 years ago, Anglicans and Roman Catholics did not worship together – it was as simple as that. How that has changed! By contrast, last October, I was privileged to be part of a group of Anglican and Roman Catholic bishops who spent a week together in Canterbury and Rome: eating, studying, discussing, praying and worshipping together. We experienced a degree of closeness that would have been unimaginable to Christians of previous generations. The climax of our time together was a service of vespers at San Gregorio al Celio, the church from which Pope St. Gregory sent out St. Augustine of Canterbury to England in the 6<sup>th</sup> century.

From that deeply symbolic location, pairs of Anglican and Catholic bishops were jointly commissioned to go out in mission by the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Pope. That was a very remarkable occasion, and when I tell colleagues - whether Anglican or Catholic about it – they are often amazed that relations between our two communions have developed to that degree.

Let me begin to draw to a close. We are disciples of the transfigured Jesus. A disciple is an apprentice. Apprentices learn by following the master, imitating him and then learning how to practise their craft for themselves. What we are about is the very exciting and radical business of becoming holy: being people whose lives shine because of their closeness to God, as Jesus's life also shone. This is a life-long process. We are never too old to change. And it is never too late to

start – or re-start: Lent for example. This coming Lent, could be for you an opportunity to commit or re-commit yourself to the changes in some areas of your life that are bound up in the following and learning of discipleship.

The transfiguration of Jesus is a sign of his divine Sonship and a sign of his radiant glory. This is a glory which will one day be ours in its fullness, but which can begin to be experienced now. So the career of the disciple is well expressed in a famous hymn by Charles Wesley with whose words I will now close:

“Changed from glory into glory  
Till in Heaven we take our place –  
Till we cast our crowns before thee:  
Lost in wonder, love and praise.”