

Sermon – Sunday 6th August 2023

When I was ten or eleven years old, I was something of a Daddy's girl. While I always felt that my Mum and sister were particularly close, talking at length about things that never seemed to concern me, it always seemed like I could talk to my Dad. He would listen to whatever it was that I had to say, and not least my frustrations with my Mum and sister. If there were ever occasions when I felt that my mum and sister were speaking out of turn against my dad, I would be his staunchest defender. And then one day, as I was sitting in my bedroom, I overheard my dad listening to my sister in the same way that he listened to me. It felt a little like my illusions were shattered. Like I wasn't as special as I had thought I was.

You may have noticed that this morning we have heard two gospel readings. If you don't usually pay much attention to these things, it is usual to hear either an Old Testament or non-gospel New Testament reading, followed by the gospel for the day. This morning, though, I was presented with a dilemma. It is, you see, the feast of the Transfiguration. That's the story that we heard in the first gospel reading from Luke, of Jesus going up the mountain with his closest disciples to pray, and being transfigured in front of them. It is also the ninth Sunday after Trinity, and although that doesn't have the same ring as Transfiguration Sunday, the chosen reading is the feeding of the five thousand from Matthew's gospel, which we have just heard – another story that I love, especially after weeks of having to make the best of weeping and gnashing of teeth.

So, just to confuse everyone, I have decided to have the best of both worlds, and set the Transfiguration alongside the feeding of the five thousand. And the reason I have done so relates back to my opening childhood story, and involves us in seeing both of this morning's gospel readings from the perspective of Peter, James and John.

The story of the Transfiguration shows those three disciples as being particularly significant. It is just those three who are chosen by Jesus to accompany him up the mountain to pray. You may have noticed that a phrase beloved of preachers is "we know very little about [insert name here]" – and we can say that of pretty much all of the disciples. Nevertheless, we do know just a little more about Peter, James and John, because if any are chosen from among the twelve, it seems to be them.

It's worth taking a moment to pause and ask ourselves how they will have experienced that. When we hear the stories of the disciples being called by Jesus, it is sometimes hard for us to understand why it was that they were prepared to follow without question. Why they apparently dropped everything, leaving behind their lives and livelihoods to be with Jesus. There was clearly something about Jesus that commanded loyalty and respect. That made people want to follow. We can imagine that they simply wanted to be in his presence, because they knew that they would grow in that environment. And they knew, too, that they would be loved unconditionally. Last week Maggie asked us to consider whether the pearl beyond price is in fact unconditional love. The stories of those who followed – and continue to follow – Jesus certainly seem to suggest that we know that being loved unconditionally is worth more than anything money can buy.

In these circumstances, I wonder how it will have felt for Peter, James and John to discover that they are further set apart. That they are the ones chosen by Jesus on particularly significant occasions. When we consider the transfiguration, the event itself will have been life-changing. Seeing Jesus change before their eyes, and experiencing the presence of Elijah and Moses. It must have been, quite literally, awesome. Making the comparison of my opening story, I wonder whether Peter, James

and John felt in this moment that they were the special children; the chosen ones; those who were loved just a little bit more than the rest.

Of course even here, we are able to see the frailties of Peter, James and John. Having apparently been specially chosen to accompany Jesus up the mountain to pray, they still find themselves struggling to stay awake. Peter's response to what he has seen is also typically impetuous, suggesting that he builds three houses for Jesus, Elijah and Moses, rather than really grappling with all that he has seen.

And as we switch our attention to the story of the feeding of the five thousand, we are also reminded of the human frailties of the disciples. If their experience of the transfiguration suggested to them that they were set apart from the others, more special in the eyes of Jesus and therefore God, this is where they come back to earth with a bump. Jesus is surrounded not just by the twelve disciples, but by an enormous crowd. Probably the disciples were used to sharing Jesus with others, but it seems that their expectation was that as the day drew to its close, the crowd would disperse, and they could have their special time.

It's perfectly possible that the disciples were being practical, probably even thoughtful, recognising that the crowd would be getting hungry. And Jesus completely confounds their expectations. The crowd stays, and they are all fed with the meagre five loaves and two fish that the disciples can muster up.

Just like when I discovered that my Dad was equally happy to listen to and empathise with my sister as with me, the disciples realise that Jesus's love extends to every person in a crowd of five thousand. If Peter, James and John enjoyed being the chosen ones at the transfiguration, this experience was surely very different.

And yet the reason I started with my personal story is because I know you will understand what I struggled to feel at the time. That my Dad didn't love me any less because he loved my sister as well. More than that, the relationship that he has with each of us is different. Each is unique and special.

So it was for the disciples; and so it is for each of us as disciples, too. We are indeed all held in God's love. We are known as our unique selves; we each have a different relationship with God; we are special, cherished children.

And we also have to remember that God's love extends to everyone else, too. That we are special; and that other people are equally, and yet differently special, too. It can be more difficult than we might like to admit to hold these two realities together. Especially when we believe that we are trying very hard to do what is right, and it feels like others aren't quite trying so hard.

Perhaps the key to holding these things together is in the words of Jesus in that second gospel reading. When the disciples suggest that the crowd should be sent into the villages to buy food for themselves, Jesus says: "you give them something to eat." There is actually a connection between the love that we are held in as unique individuals, and the fact that everyone else is held in love, too. And the connection is what we do with the love in which we are held. What Jesus suggests to his disciples is that they become part of his mission of love. That once they have experienced being loved, they pour it out towards others. That they do as he does. When people are hungry, they give them something to eat.

I do believe that at St. Mary's we are fortunate enough to know and experience God's love. And I believe that in the care and nurture that we show one another, we recognise that it is not for us alone. And yet as disciples we never stand still. There are so many others who simply don't know what it is to know that they are loved. Who are still hungry. And Jesus says to us, just as he did to the twelve, "you give them something to eat."

Amen