**Luke 9:28-43**

**Celebrating Sukkot**

So this morning, we are remember the next in our series of Jewish Festivals. We have remembered Harvest and Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur and today, we celebrate Sukkot. Sukkot falls on the fifth day after Yom Kippur and whereas Yom Kippur is a very solemn and serious festival, Sukkot is a time of real celebration and joy.

The word ‘sukkot’ means ‘booth’ - and it refers to the temporary shelters, or booths, that the people of Israel lived in when they wandered around the desert for 40 years following their escape from Egypt under the ministry of Moses.

And it’s a time to remember God’s presence with us and the way in which God leads us through life and keeps us safe even though we are undeserving, and sometimes lost in disobedience. And it’s a time for us to remember God’s provision for our lives too, particularly to reflect again on the wonderful harvest of food that we have and how we have our material needs met by our loving God.

And Jewish practice nowadays at Sukkot is to build ‘sukkah’ – booths, temporary shelters - which is a really fun activity for the children to do, particularly, and maybe even to sleep in the sukkah for the night.

And it is good for us to take time at Sukkot to remember God’s presence with us, for us to reflect on God’s guidance in our lives, because the truth is for us that we so often forget that presence of God in our lives. We get so caught up in the busyness of life, and even the mundane of life, that it is very easy to lose sight of God being with us. It would be wonderful if it were different: it would be wonderful if we had a permanent awareness of ‘God with us’, it would be wonderful if God spoke to us clearly and audibly every day, it would be wonderful if we didn’t have to work hard to find God in our lives but, instead, we were immediately aware of his presence on a permanent basis. If that were the case, it would make being a Christian much easier when life got tough or boring or when things weren’t going our way or when we were facing a personal crisis or when we were having to make tough decisions.

But life isn’t like that, is it? Moments of absolute clarity concerning the presence of God with us

are few and far between. Like the Israelites in the wilderness for 40 years, we are walking by faith, not by sight. Just as they had to go through the mundane of life with just the promise of a bright future but living the reality of a difficult Present, so that is often the case with us. The Israelites would travel through the wilderness and they would pitch their sukkah and live in that place for a while and then dismantle their sukkah and move on to the next place and start again. Their lives were constantly changing, constantly shifting – a real daily struggle - and the booths they lived in were a symbol of that. But God’s presence with them was the constancy they experienced. But like us, in the shifting and fragile nature of daily life, the Israelites had to walk by faith, not by sight, and sometimes just cling on to the promise of God’s presence even when they couldn’t feel God’s presence.

All of us long for a more tangible experience of God in our lives: of course we do; that is the common human experience. And it is the desire of all Christians throughout history. And that desire to have a tangible experience of God is at the heart of our Gospel story that we have just heard read.

This is the story that we call ‘the Transfiguration of Jesus. It’s a key moment in the life of Jesus; so important that Matthew, Mark and Luke all write about it and Peter refers to the event again in his second letter, 2 Peter 1:16-18. The disciples had seen some pretty extraordinary things during their time with Jesus but here was an event that completely blew them away; an event that went way beyond their understanding.

The transfiguration happens when Jesus goes up a mountain to pray. Mountains are important in the Bible because they often symbolise a dramatic encounter with God. Noah’s Ark came to rest on Mount Ararat. Moses met with God on Mount Sinai. Jesus gave the Sermon on the Mount. And here, the Transfiguration happens on a mountain. We don’t know which mountain it was; it’s not made clear in the Bible but it was likely to be Mount Hermon, which is fairly close to Caesarea Philippi.

But Jesus doesn’t go alone: he takes with him Peter, James and John who are his closest friends. And then this extraordinary thing happens, verse 29: “And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white.”

Jesus was transfigured in front of them. He was changed, bathed in such a bright light that everything else would have seemed like darkness. The Transfiguration of Jesus must have looked incredible to the three disciples. When Luke records this story, the word he uses for ‘dazzling white’ is the Greek word that is used to describe flashes of lightning: a quite incredible scene.

And then, as if that wasn’t enough, we read in verse 30: “Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him”. So again, Luke reminds us of our Jewish heritage as Christians, which we have been thinking about over the last few weeks. As I mentioned when we celebrated Illy’s baptism, Jesus did not suddenly appear in a vacuum, disconnected from the culture of his day. Instead, Jesus was part of the spiritual lineage of Israel: the next in the line of God’s messengers to the human race; the culmination of all that had gone before as God himself takes human form.

And the fact that Moses and Elijah are present at the Transfiguration is crucial to the Gospel writers placing Jesus in his appropriate context. Moses represents the Law of Israel and Elijah represents the Prophets of Israel and here they are now, talking with Jesus. Luke tell us that they “were speaking of his departure” - and the word Luke uses for ‘departure’ is a very unusual one because it is the word ‘exodus’: they were speaking about Jesus’ exodus and, again, we have overtones that draw us back to the Old Testament books of Genesis and Exodus.

And Peter, not surprisingly, was completely overwhelmed by the scene unfolding in front of him and just gabbled a load of nonsense to them, verse 33: “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” What a bizarre thing to say! But Peter was completely overwhelmed by this experience of the power of God.

And I think this is the point: Peter and James and John were having a quite incredible experience, something they had never anticipated possible. It was an experience of God that they felt may never happen again. And so Peter wants to bottle it – he wants to preserve it forever. He wants to build three shelters, to build three sukkah, he wants to put down a permanent marker of that experience so that when life is a bit dull, a bit ordinary, a bit run of the mill, he can always head up to Mount Hermon and re-live the spiritual high…

This is a temptation that we all face, I think: we have probably all had experiences of God, where we have felt uplifted and deeply blessed, moments of real transcendence where we have felt closer to God than every before. And in those moments of transcendent worship, we have wanted to bottle the experience. And whilst the moment of Transfiguration was an incredible moment of blessing, Jesus didn’t want his disciples to rest there or bottle the experience as if the memory of it would provide an everlasting antidote to the drudgery of everyday life. Because the reality of Christian discipleship is that we are called not to bottle the incredible moments of deep intimacy with God. Instead, we are to find God in the ordinary and in the everyday moments of life.

Sukkot is a celebration of the permanent presence of God in the impermanence of our lives. We can’t live in a permanent moment of a transfiguration experience. Instead we are to find God in the washing up and the commute to work, in the run of the mill routine of life, with all its joys and sorrow, excitement and boredom. That is where we are to find God and that’s exactly what happens to the disciples after the Transfiguration.

As we move to verse 37 in this passage, the disciples come down from the mountain with Jesus and look what they immediately face: “A great crowd met him. Just then a man from the crowd shouted, ‘Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It throws him into convulsions until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not’.”

What a contrast! Three disciples had just seen Jesus talking to Moses and Elijah and watched him being transfigured into blinding light and here they are now back into the crowd and the noise and the demanding people and confronted by a man with a sick child. That is the stuff of everyday life; crowds of people, noise, sick children, demands on our time.

That is the stuff of everyday life, isn’t it?

We might wish that we could stay on the mountaintop and enjoy the incredible spectacle of a transfigured God speaking with the heroes of history. We might want to build sukkah as a permanent reminder of the presence of God and enjoy the celebration and rejoicing of sukkot on a daily basis. But the reality is, we have ordinary responsibilities, ordinary tasks to complete, and we need to live in the ordinariness of life.

And if that is where we need to live, then we need to learn to find God there. We need to understand that, by nature, God is with us in our everyday lives.

Our God is not a remote God, who leaves us to struggle through the pains of our lives. Instead, God comes off the mountain and into the valley of our lives and gets his hands dirty to bring us healing and wholeness of life. That is the message of this passage: the disciples were confused, the child’s father was anxious for his sick son, the crowd were anxious to see the boy healed, the disciples were feeling powerless to help and overwhelmed by the situation. But Jesus comes down from the mountain and meets them in their everyday need.

That was the example of Jesus here. And, of course, that is the example of Jesus on the cross - that God promises to meet you in the anxieties and difficulties of your everyday life. And the heart of the Christian experience is having faith that God will meet us in this way.

The miracle of the Gospel is that the Word became flesh and has dwelt among us. God came into the everyday through the stable in Bethlehem and redeemed the everyday on a cross in Jerusalem and filled our everydayness with the glory of heaven through the Ascension. That is the miracle of the Christian faith.

And when our lives seem mundane, when our lives seem far from Transcendent, we need to hold on to the miracle of faith and seek the Extraordinary God in the everydayness of life. Because the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Christ came down from the Mountain of Transfiguration into the Valley of Confusion. The Extraordinary met us in the Ordinary.

The Christian experience is simply this: our everyday lives, with all their joys and celebrations, pains and tears, become transformed by the presence of God to us.

And that is why it is so important to receive Communion, to share the bread and the wine as an absolute focal point of your life of worship. Not because there is anything magical about the bread and the wine. But God becomes present to us through the bread and wine as we receive him by faith. The bread and the wine are the perfect representation of the absolute heart of the Christian faith. Ordinary, everyday bread and wine becomes for us the body and blood of Christ, the presence of God in our midst. We eat the bread and drink the wine in an ordinary way. But through that act, we receive God into the very depths of our being in a most extraordinary way.

So as we prepare to receive the bread and the wine this morning, we give over to God our everyday lives; all the joys and sorrows, pleasures and pains - and we ask him to become Word in our flesh. We ask him to become transfigured in us and we meet with him in the bread and in the wine. And we anticipate that it will be a moment of transformation, a moment of transfiguration