

Service of Confirmation with Holy Communion: Headington Quarry, Oxford
The Sunday next before Lent 18.02.2007

2 Corinthians 3.12-4.2 and St Luke 9.28-43

Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray.

I had never heard of ALISTAIR HUMPHRIES until one day I heard him being interviewed when I was listening to the car radio. What emerged in the course of the interview was that he had cycled round the world in four years. To complete this epic journey, he had needed three bicycles; five wheels; twenty tyres and he had quite a tale to tell of adventures he had had and people he had met. He was innocent enough to tell two stories against himself – and he was happy enough to let anyone listening laugh at him because he had the good sense to laugh at himself. The first thing he told was that, as he left home setting out, his mother called him back, shouting after him that he had forgotten his bicycle helmet. Hardly the best of a start for someone hoping to cycle round the world! The second thing was that, as he left the village in which he lived, he took the wrong road. Again, hardly the best way to begin! BUT there he was, four years later, telling the tale of how he had cycled round the world and it was a magnificent achievement.

To me he seemed to be almost surprised by the fact that he had become a hero. As well as the many adventures which he had, the things which he remembered most were the kindnesses which people had shown him as he turned his wheels day after day. These acts of kindness came from people who had never seen him before and whom he would never see again. All of this made a deep impression on him as he simply had no option but to trust them even though he knew next to nothing about them. For those of us who are children, our world is one where trust in others meets and often struggles with our need to express our own independence. Few of us like to be told what we should be thinking, what we should be wearing, doing or saying. But it is in a climate of trust that we flourish and find our feet and grow self-confident in our independence of action and thought. For those of us who are adults, trust like much else is more complicated. We are faced with the limitations of what we can do for ourselves and too often we resent the intervention of other people whose help we need. More and more we seem to trust others only when things get really difficult and when we are no longer able to manage on our own. We simply do not want to have to climb down and admit that it is other people we need more than ourselves.

Many of these ideas we see played out in the Gospel for today. The Transfiguration of Jesus is many ways helpful in understanding Confirmation. As Peter, John and James had a wonderful time on their own with Jesus, Moses and Elijah representing the law and the prophets – just the six of them - they must indeed have felt that the new time really had come and they were well in there ahead of the other nine disciples. But Peter comes across as rather hasty. And we will see this in him time and again. But we have also to remember that he became a great and wonderful leader in the church of God and gave his whole life for the outward movement of the Gospel into the world around him. He wants this particular experience of Transfiguration to last. He suggests a small housing development to keep everyone together but everything changes.

God speaks and the three privileged disciples find themselves immediately alone again with Jesus, asking themselves: Did any of this really happen? What was it about? And when they come down from the mountain, they find that the other disciples had got absolutely nowhere with someone who was in need of healing. The father of the child is beside himself with anger and frustration. The child is suffering the torment and the torture of demon possession. And Jesus cuts through all of the jealousies, the pushing and the shoving of the disciples and heals the child himself. They all find that the sarcastic comments they were going to make to one another hold no water. They have nothing to offer beyond their shared need of Jesus. It is a chilling lesson for all of these disciples, those who were and those who were not on the Mountain of Transfiguration with Jesus, to learn in public, to be humiliated before a crowd of people. And what they learned was that they needed Jesus. He cleared them out of the way and went ahead and just did it.

The short phrase: **more and more** comes up again and again in the Confirmation Service itself. They are important words because there is no way in which you can take in all of what is happening today in one go. These words point to the way in which gradually – more and more – things will make sense to you as you give God more and more scope in your life and more and more influence on who you are becoming. These words are part of the Confirmation prayer also: *Confirm these people today, o Lord, with your heavenly grace, that they may continue to be yours for ever, and daily increase in your Holy Spirit more and more until they come to your eternal kingdom.*

Christianity is not something which you can do all on your own. It is a team effort, a joint project. At the beginning and the end of the day, it is every bit as much about other people as it is about yourself. It is about helping others, sharing their burden and letting them share yours. Another thing which will come home to you is that there are **more and more** questions thrown up into the air by Christianity. I am convinced that there is *more* interest in religion today at a time when all we seem to want to talk about is decline in churches. There are **more and more** ways in which we need to give expression to the interesting parts of Christianity which, in fact, are ALL its parts. We, like everyone else, need to be thinking outside the box and allowing people who know us to ask questions about the church and things that matter to them because those things also matter to the church. I hope that the confidence to put your hand up, the asking of questions, the puzzlement and the faithfulness which you have shown and experienced in your preparation for Confirmation will continue. Faith lies in the question every bit as much as in the answer.

A wonderful gift which we have in the church is the freedom of God. Another wonderful gift is the whole of humanity is being transformed, indeed transfigured, into the glory of God which we see as the Second Letter to the Corinthians expresses it: *with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror.* The Spirit has moved forward from the Law. The way of knowing is now different. The Spirit of God in the ancient tradition of the church moves in and through this Service of Confirmation and gives to each of you seven gifts:

the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of right judgement and inward strength,
the spirit of knowledge and godly living; and the spirit of reverence for the Lord.

You do not need to have all the answers. Like Alistair Humphries, setting out to cycle round the world, you can make mistakes at the start. You will have punctures. You will need new tyres and wheels. You will need to trust people you may meet only once.

But you also have to want to want to do it. As in the Transfiguration of Jesus which prepares us for both glory and reality as we embark on the Season of Lent, things will change while also remaining the same. You will have to let that happen and you will have to be patient with yourself and with other people. May God help you in doing just that! And I hope that you find it easier to do than I do.

Then from the cloud came a voice which said: This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him! When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone.