Birnam & Stanley 070216

The readings today are about Transfiguration – a particular kind of transformation in which it becomes possible to see glory and wonder. The Exodus reading was about the shining face of Moses. When he came down from the mountain where he had received the ten commandments and when he went in to meet with God – those were the moments when his face shone. And Jesus goes up the mountain with Peter, James and John. He is transfigured before them. There is shining glory and the presence of Moses and Elijah. They want to do things, to build dwellings for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. But the cloud comes, the voice proclaims Jesus as the chosen one and they are reduced to silence in the presence of that glory.

It was literally a mountain-top experience. And its purpose was not so much the thing itself as the need to prepare Jesus to go down the mountain to continue his ministry. At the top of the mountain, there was light and wonder, purity and splendour. Down at the bottom of the mountain is the untidiness of life, the pressure of the crowds, the confusion of the disciples about who it was that they were following. And beyond that was arrest, trial and crucifixion.

It is always interesting to see how the readings which happen to be chosen for this day speak powerfully to our situation.

We together hold a vision. In a long period of consultation between the congregations in this area and the diocese, we gradually shaped our life around a new way of thinking about our congregations. So we now have a group of congregations centred on Pitlochry serving the Highland Perthshire area. They have problems and challenges. But the vision is alive. Here our vision has been for mission in the area between here and the north of Perth, centred here and in Stanley. That vision is alive. Shona is here because she feels called to help the congregations grow into that vision.

As in the readings, there are mountain-top visions which inspire – where we can get a feeling that we are responding to God’s call. And down the mountain things are less clear. Shona and Philip have shared with you some of the difficulties which have arisen, particularly around some of the decision-making associated with the extension to the Rectory. There has been some confusion, some hurt and some anger. I was here with the Vestry during the week – with John F-S and our Dean – and we talked about how the diocese and the Vestry can work together, how you can be supported in putting it all back together and being inspired again by the vision. It was a good meeting. Your Vestry is faithful and committed. We want to work together to sort it out and move forward again.

None of this comes as a surprise to me. I am here doing what I do because in my early 20’s at the beginning of the Northern Ireland troubles, I was inspired by the vision of reconciliation and how I might contribute to it. Twenty-nine years later, when I left Ireland, the vision was still bright for me. Some wonderful things had happened. But much of it had been a messy failure and a disappointment. So it is wherever ministry takes me – in the diocese, the wider life of the SEC and in the Anglican Communion across the world.

The question is always the same. It is whether we can get up the mountain now and again to catch a glimpse of the glory that is there – enough of a vision to be moved to silence in the presence of God’s glory – enough of a sense of the rightness of what we have committed our lives to – enough so that when we go down the mountain into the muddle and confusion which we find at the bottom we can keep going and keep on keeping going.

My purpose in being here today is to be supportive – a support to you and a support to Shona – so that together we can regain a sense of the glory and of the vision to which we have committed ourselves.