

Transfiguration

Brian Herring

Thought for the
Week
- a spiritual smorgasbord
from our preachers

The lectionary reading from the gospels for next Sunday is the story of the transfiguration of Jesus as told in Mark's Gospel and this reminded me

immediately of the words of the hymn "Stay, Master stay upon this heavenly hill" (No. 158 in Hymns & Psalms). The writer of the hymn's interpretation of the reading seems to be that Peter's wish to stay longer on the mountain top in the light of Jesus indicated a preference to delay getting too involved in what was happening outside what might be called his comfort zone.

As this seems to have been the only hymn written by Samuel Greg, I carried out some research on the author in order to understand what had inspired him to choose the transfiguration of Jesus as the basis and it seems that the words mirrored his own experiences.

He was born in Manchester and came from a wealthy cotton mill owning family; in 1832 – after completing the obligatory Grand Tour – he was put in charge of the family's Lowerhouse Mill. He had been very much influenced by his mother's religious beliefs and was convinced that the mill could thrive only if the workers were well housed, well fed, in good health and properly educated. As a result, he provided a school, a library, gardens and allotments as an addition to the existing houses already provided for the workers. There were also lessons on growing vegetables, healthy eating and healthy living.

In 1838, he and his family moved to a house called The Mount – with what are described as fine views across the valley to the hills in the east – perhaps the "heavenly hill" referred to in the hymn, but in 1846 everything changed after he installed new machinery and the mill workers came out on strike. It is said that he was so shocked that he never again set foot in the mill.

It is recorded that he subsequently became a magistrate and spent his time on what could be called matters of social improvement. The date on which he wrote the hymn is not known but it seems reasonable to assume that it is based on his belief that his real task lay

not in living a life of relative luxury in The Mount but in doing what he could to improve the lifestyles of those less fortunate.

The strike in 1846 had made Samuel Greg realise that following Jesus was not always easy or popular and that motives for change could be suspected; the words of the fourth verse to his hymn – not included in Hymns & Psalms but appearing in earlier Methodist hymnbooks – show his acceptance of this. The final verse is as under:

*“If man aspires to reach the throne of God,
O’er the dull plains of earth must lie the road,
He who best does his lowly duty here,
Shall mount the highest in a nobler sphere:
At God’s own feet our spirits seek their rest,
And he is nearest Him whom serves Him best.”*

I am finishing with a prayer based on an extract from Eddie Askew’s book Disguises of Love:

“Lord, help me to find the joy that comes with answering your demands. Help me to find the freedom that comes from walking in your love. Help me to know the peace of your Spirit”

Can anyone seeking to bring the light of the knowledge of Jesus into the lives of others ask for any more than this?