

Today's sermon is inspired by our bishop, Bishop Susan, who gathered all the clergy together in the Cathedral one-day last holy week, and she preached a sermon, which included the tagline of an organization that she'd come across. It was a three-word tagline, and it was this. Gather, transform, send. And I wasn't the only priest in the Cathedral to think, oh, that's interesting. We could use that in our church because that's what we hope goes on in our church life, that we gather people together, that we're transformed by God working amongst us, and then we're sent out into the world to work for God's kingdom.

And I came back and shared these thoughts with the vestry, and we had a day retreat and started to put together a five-year mission action plan with these headings. Gather, transform, send. And we'll be saying more about that at the Congregational meeting on the 29th of this month, to which I hope you can all come.

And as I read today's gospel, those three words were on my mind, and I thought, well, actually, you can read this gospel reading as an example of that pattern of gather, transform, and send. This is a very important passage. It's the first time in the gospel that Jesus is recognized and named as the Messiah. It's a reading that occurs in the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke. In all three gospels, Peter's recognition of Jesus as the Messiah acts as the hinge point. The rest of the Gospel pivots on this insight. And in fact, it comes this story right in the middle of the gospel. Before this passage, Jesus never talks about his suffering in his teaching, but after this passage, after he's been recognized as Messiah, suddenly his teaching changes and he talks about what's involved with being the Messiah, and he goes on to talk about his suffering on the cross.

So the very next line after the passage that we've heard begins thus. "Then he began to teach them that the son of man must undergo great suffering." That's a significant gear change. And if we're to understand this important passage properly, then we need to look at what comes before. Like I found myself often saying that the meaning comes in the context, but that's especially true with this passage. And what we see happening before Peter's declaration is a story of Jesus healing a blind man. Jesus heals a blind man so that he can see. And when

we see Peter's confession in that context, we realize that the Peter story is also a story about seeing. The first act, the healing miracle story, is a story about physical seeing. The Peter story is a story about spiritual seeing. And if we look at the healing story more closely, we'll see that it has some unusual features.

It's the only healing or miracle story in the gospels that happens in stages. It's a two-stage process. If you look, Jesus spits on his hands, lays his hands on the blind man's eyes and says to him, "Can you see anything?" He says, "Well, yes I can. I can see people, but they look like trees." In other words, he doesn't see very clearly. So, Jesus touches his eyes again, and then he sees clearly. It could almost be read this story as if Jesus's healing of the man didn't work first time. It didn't take. And he had to give it another go. Maybe that's why no other gospel includes this passage, only Mark, who was often braver to include things that could be read in strange ways.

And only Mark had a reason for including this story, because it illustrates for him what happens in the next paragraph with Peter's acknowledgement of Jesus as the Messiah. The next paragraph begins, "Jesus went on with his disciples." The disciples were this ragbag group that he'd gathered together to accompany him in his ministry. And he asked them, "Who do people say that I am?"

Jesus had his reasons for asking this question, which is different to the man who walked into a very popular restaurant in London, called the Ivy and demanded a table. And the maître d' politely told him that there wasn't a table available that night. And the man leaned over the desk and said, "Do you know who I am?" The maître d' banged his desk turned to the people in the restaurant, said, "Excuse me, excuse me. Does anybody here know who this poor man is, because he seems to have forgotten?"

But back to our gospel reading, it says, "they answered him, John the Baptist, others Elijah and others, one of the prophets." And then Jesus asks again, "who do you say that I am?" Now the you there could be plural or singular, but it's not they that answer this time. It's Peter. Peter says, "You are the Messiah."

And just in case you think a penny has dropped in Peter's mind here, and all of a sudden, he gets everything and understands Jesus and his mission entirely, you might know what happens next. Jesus says, as I mentioned, that the son of man must suffer all these things and Peter takes Jesus aside and says, "No, no, no, that's not how it is with the Messiah." And Jesus turns to him and said, "Get behind me Satan." So, no sooner had Peter recognized Jesus for who he is, it soon becomes clear he doesn't understand what's involved in being the Messiah.

He named Jesus as the Messiah, but he didn't really know what that meant. Like the blind man in the miracle story, Peter didn't see everything clearly straight away. He saw, he had some insight, but it wasn't clear. And our spiritual sight, like Peter's, develops over time. It's not that we have a great moment of spiritual insight and conversion and then suddenly we're fully formed as Christians and understand all that there is to know.

Spiritual transformation, formation, is a process that happens in stages over time. That's why here at St. James, we value our education and formation part of church life. It's one of the big elements in Reverend Abby's new job description. That's her area of responsibility, and in the coming months, she'll be putting together a range of offerings designed to help us to be formed as Christians. Our 9:00 education hour kicks off next week with a series that's mirroring some of our sermons on the Book of Job, and we'll be looking at a book by Richard Rohr to accompany that complex biblical book. And I invite you all to come and join us as we learn together. We always have things to learn. We can always see things more clearly. Church is not a place for perfect, fully formed Christians. It's a place for people who are looking to be transformed to be more like Jesus.

There was a woman in my last church called Mary who had a sister with whom she had a rather antagonistic relationship, and the sister was an atheist, and they often argued about faith. In the midst of one argument one day, Mary's sister accused her of hypocrisy and said, "You go to church every week, but you are still so selfish." And Mary, who wasn't always the most tactful person, said to her sister, "Well, you go to the gym every day and you are still fat."

Her point, whilst not sensitively put, was well-made. We don't wait till we are perfect to come to church. We come as we are in the hope that we might be transformed. In the olden days, they used to talk about being sanctified. I rarely hear that church word anymore, but it was a word that talked about the process of the spirit making us more like Jesus, being formed in his image. Transformation is an ongoing process. We get to see more and more clearly.

Before I close, I want to say something about sending. When Jesus had gathered his disciples together and taught them and transformed their understanding, so they properly understood his mission, he sent them out into the world as his messengers. And that rag-bag group of men transformed the world. So too with us, we are to be sent into the world to share the good news of God's love through word and deed.

Today is Rally Sunday, which means that we have what's called a ministry fair. There are tents outside, you can't not fail to have missed them on your way into church, which talk about the various aspects of church life, and we hope to share that information and hope that you might get involved in some way. And one of the stalls I encourage you to seek out is the Outreach Committee who do a great job linking us up with partner organizations outside of our community, our church community, and that's a great way of engaging and going out and being sent into the world. So, I encourage you to see if there's a ministry there to which you might feel sent.

So, gather, transform, send. These are some buzzwords that are going to be coming into our church life in this new season, and I hope you can come to the congregational meetings on the 29th and hear what the Vestry are imagining for the next stage of our life together. Amen.