

The transformational thin space of Transfiguration.

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 23 February, 2020

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Gareth Thomas-Burchell

Transfiguration A

Exodus 24: 12-18; Matthew 17: 1-9

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

This particular Sunday on the liturgical calendar, is the Sunday some ministers like to take a holiday, because it falls on the theme that many like to avoid. Transfiguration Sunday. The other Sunday to avoid is Trinity Sunday. Both these Sundays are steeped in mystery and intrigue and a subject of which are as slippery as wet soap. The theology is fluid and changeable with the change of time, era, individual and community.

In this day and age, when we prefer to cling to the solid and the tangible, occasionally, we get thrown the theological curve ball. My apologies for the American baseball sporting analogy. I suppose the Australian equivalent is either the googly spin ball or the reverse swing fast ball in cricket.

What I am saying is that Transfiguration Sunday is a theological challenge for those who prefer certainty and uniformity. But that is the beauty and the point of Transfiguration Sunday. It is meant to leave us in awe and speechless and gasping for breath. Articulation is not compulsory this time. Silence and wide eyed awe is!

Today is Transfiguration Sunday, the climax of the season of Epiphany during which time, the identity of Jesus is gradually revealed. Transfiguration Sunday is the day we celebrate the full exposure, the full revelation of Jesus.

We hear the words once again, that we heard on the occasion of Jesus' baptism, "*This is my Own, my Beloved, on whom my favour rests. Listen to him!*"

The Transfiguration of Jesus is a big deal and it leads us into the season of Lent so we know who it is that we are following. But like all stories, there is context to this one. Allow me to offer you my understanding.

We are invited into the context when it says, "Six days later", and we have to ask, six days after what? This is an important detail of which we need to know, in order to grasp the significance of what we celebrate today.

Six days before, was Peter's response to Jesus, when Jesus asked his disciples who people say that he was, of which Peter said:

“Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” When Jesus said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter said, “You are the Messiah, the Firstborn of the living God.”

After blessing Peter’s Godly insight, Jesus shares with the disciples that he must now turn his face towards Jerusalem. This is the turning point of the journey for the disciples and Jesus, because up till now, it has been filled with teaching, healings and miracles, and the wave of popularity has been increasing steadily. You could say that the journey has been easy up to this point.

Not surprising that Peter rebuked Jesus, when told that the party of popularity was over, and the journey was going to get tough and risky. Unpopular even to death.

Then Jesus re-issues the invitation to follow in the risky journey to Jerusalem.

And now, six days later, we find ourselves on the mountain with Peter, James and John, and the transfigured Jesus. This is the gob-smacking experience when we are driven to silence. For some of us, it is not a comfortable space to be in, considering that we are a people who feel more comfortable when there is chatter.

Well, Peter cannot help but chatter. He thinks the whole experience is so fantastic that he suggests packaging it in the construction of three shelters. Could this be Peter suggesting the need to memorialising the experience, and so reconstructing it when need or urge arises? According to the gospel of Matthew, God cuts Peter’s chatter short, by saying:

“This is my Own, my Beloved, on whom my favour rests. Listen to him!”

One may ask, in our pursuit to preserve and make permanent does God remind us that faith is not in a fixed place?

Rather it moves from place to place and is to be found wherever we are in life’s journey. A reminder of the wanderers in the desert and the daily manna. We do not need to return to a specific time and place! Indeed, we are not to return to that time and place ever. Walking with Jesus and God is never stagnant or fixed, but forever moving.

Listening to Jesus infers being in this time and place, with the possibility of looking into the unknown future. The response of fear is understandable when many prefer to settle into the security of the past.

We echo the response of the disciples, *“When they heard this, the disciples fell forward on the ground, overcome with fear.”*

An observation by another on this passage was made with the word “up”. Up the mountain. That word conjures the positive and the possibility of seeing. When the disciples fell forward to the ground, they were not able to see and were filled with fear, that is until *Jesus came toward them and touched them saying, “Get up, do not be afraid.”*

When they looked up, they did not see anyone but Jesus.

It is that moment when the disciples awake from Jesus' invitation not to be afraid, that we look up and take a breath. That is the moment of seeing Jesus in full revelation. That is the moment of awe, that is the moment of being speechless, that is the moment of seeing Jesus and being silent.

We are struck dumb with this passage, and perhaps feel inadequate to speak and comment on what this passage is all about. But that is a sound response (sic), as we can only respond with awe and silence and some fear and trepidation, because we get a tad scared when we do not understand.

We live in an age when everything has to be explained. Or so it seems. Scientific proof and exhaustive hypothesis is the way for our post enlightenment world.

However, among some today, is that happy acceptance of the unknown and living in the moment. What is emerging is the brave excitement that to not know everything in our faith, is a good space to find ourselves, when we meet Jesus in that thin space between the earthly and the heavenly.

It is OK to be dumbstruck, unwise and unknowing. So when we hear today's passage, let us not try to be too clever. That would be unwise.

Following Jesus takes us beyond our understanding and that takes a lot of risk.

Following Jesus is not the way or prescription to a routine and predictable life.

Following Jesus is full of surprises.

Following Jesus is about not having the answers.

Following Jesus is to look up.

Following Jesus, is to take up his invitation: "*Get up, do not be afraid!*"

Seeing the Transfiguration of Jesus is seeing the potential in us and others.

Seeing the Transfiguration of Jesus is being in the thin space where earth and heaven meet.

Seeing the Transfiguration of Jesus is hearing the voice from the cloud saying "Listen to him".

As the song that we sang earlier says,

*Open your eyes see yourself
in the one who's shining on the hill,
hear the voice say to you,
"This is the one that I love!"*

The voice in the cloud says that not only is Jesus loved, but so are you. And that is the moment we are in now, the thin space where earth and heaven meets.

I want to read to you now, a prayer by Bill Loaderⁱ

Let's go up the mountain.
Let's go up to the place where the land meets the sky
where the earth touches the heavens,
to the place of meeting,
to the place of mists,
to the place of voices and conversations,
to the place of listening.

O God,
We open our eyes and we see Jesus,
the months of ministry transfigured to a beam of light,
the light of the world,
your light.
May your light shine upon us.

We open our eyes and we see Moses and Elijah,
your word restoring us, showing us the way,
telling a story,
your story, his story, our story.

May your word speak to us.

We open our eyes and we see mist,
the cloud of your presence
which assures us of all we do not know
and that we do not need to fear that.

ⁱ Revd Emeritus Professor William R. G. Loader.
<http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/lectionaryindex.html>