

Love Changes Everything

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 26 February 2017

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Transfiguration A

Exodus 24: 12-18; Matthew 17: 1-9; Contemporary Reading:
excerpt from "*Bird of paradise*" by Monica Furlong

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under "Sunday Reflections" tab

When I first saw a photograph of Mt Tabor (on the front of today's liturgy sheet), which has come to be associated with the transfiguration, I was a bit disappointed. When I'd heard the story read at the time, I imagined a rather more impressive mountain. I felt a similar sense of disappointment when I realised that the Blue Mountains to the west of Sydney were an escarpment rather than actual mountains. I grew up in the shadow of the southern alps. Being a New Zealander means having rather high standards when it comes to mountains. But this transfiguration place was a mountain that could be walked up, in bare feet or sandals...

The transfiguration story has so much myth to work through, but also so much truth to offer. This is one of the biblical stories which should not be engaged with as fact. And neither should it be dismissed as fiction.

In the story, there is an invitation to transcendence, to mystery, to meaning - which doesn't depend on whether or not Jesus actually shone and whether the ghosts of patriarchs past appeared to validate his ministry.

I am fascinated by Peter's response to whatever it was that happened. He proposed to build three dwellings so that he could stay on the mountain with Jesus and the disciples. Quite understandably, he wanted to hold on to the power of the moment: to seeing the divine reflected in Jesus, and seeing visions of Moses and Elijah. But if they were to follow Jesus and to listen to him as they had been directed to do, Peter and the disciples had to come down the mountain with Jesus. Down to ordinary life and ordinary people.

I find both Peter's desire, and Jesus instruction to go back down the mountain, reassuring.

For many people, religious or spiritual experiences are associated with mountain top moments, times when they are alone, or among a small group of friends. Times at the beginning of life - and times at the end of life. Precious times of sacred awareness.

Experience of mystery can generate a spiritual high and it makes sense that we want to hold on to them, to protect them from the in-breaking of everyday life and common concerns.

But this story is telling us, if we too want to follow Jesus and listen to him as we have been directed, then we must come down from the mountain, and return to life in community.

For many Australians, and New Zealanders, for that matter, religious experience is often associated with a beautiful wilderness, beach or mountain place. It's almost become a cliché for the spiritual but not religious to name mystical experiences in terms of encounters with the untamed, unspoiled natural world.

In our culture, we are much less likely to speak of our lives in relationship in spiritual terms. We are much less likely to speak of our first kiss, or a moment of meaningful sexual intimacy as a spiritual experience. Or to name as spiritual, long conversations in troubled or joyful times, spent with dear friends sharing food and wine.

Does our perception of religion or spirituality separate us from others, when God calls us to be in relationship with others? Peter wanted to hold on to the mountain moment. But Jesus is telling us again and again to find God amongst the ordinary people; the people he associated with, and with whom we are now called into relationship.

How would religion change if we understood that we are at one with God when we are at one with other people, all other people? When we allow the moments of transfiguration, not to separate us from ordinary life, but rather to transform ordinary life, because we have seen differently. Because the love we have experienced, changes everything.

We see differently. Love changes everything. This is the point of religious experience.

This story allows us to embrace emotion and mystery and keeps us connected to community. Yes, we go to the mountain, but we also live in the messiness of work, recreation, family and friends.

Emotion and mystery are vital aspects of religious life. This was not something that I learned in the middle-of-the-road Presbyterian Church where I grew up but it was part of my short-lived teenage evangelical experience. Now, in a community like Pitt Street I appreciate the space to be both intellectual and emotional, to think my faith, to explore the questions, and still sing my heart out with the retro emotion of Shine Jesus Shine (with appropriate adaptations for inclusive God language).

The purpose of the high moments is conveyed in the story when the voice of God tells the disciples to listen to Jesus. And Jesus tells them to go down the mountain.

It's interesting to think about who Peter, James and John saw with Jesus on the mountain: Moses the liberator and Elijah the prophet. Moses, who led the people out of oppression in Egypt; Elijah, whom King Ahab had called, "*that trouble of Israel*," because he condemned the people's compromise between true and false gods as the underlying cause of their problems.

It's also important to pay attention to what happened next in this story, something that is missing from today's lectionary passage, which finishes too soon. At the very moment, when the disciples experienced the mystical and transcendent dimension of religion, Jesus takes them away from visions, away from privatized religion, to meet the ones who needed them most in the town.

In the story, it continues to say: Jesus takes them to a man whose son was possessed by a demon. Jesus leads them down to the bottom of that mountain to the hurting people, to the unbelieving officials, to the ineffective institutions: to all the demons below.

Real religion is not about building churches and institutions away from the world. The purpose of religion is healing hurts, speaking for and being with the poor, the excluded, and the voiceless who wait at the bottom of every hierarchy and every system of church and state.

But this doesn't mean that the experience of mystery is meaningless. It's tempting for intellectual progressive people to emphasise the going down the mountain into the situation of community, to follow Jesus and the prophets in transforming the world. But this story is reminding us that the 'being' moments are to be held together with the 'doing' moments in our lives. If we don't have the mystery, the sense of profound connection, we may not have the resources that we need for the doing of life. We may not have the way of seeing that will enable us to live well in the world.

We are to return. But we are to see the ordinary differently. The place where we dwell is now illuminated by our spiritual journeying.

TS Elliott wrote in Little Gidding:

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

This Sunday, this Transfiguration, is one of the turning points of the Christian year. It is the door that leads us out of the Advent/Christmas/Epiphany pathway. Ahead of us lies the season of Lent. So today we take a moment, to breathe, to be, to savour the mountain air, and to remember the pathway that we have passed through; and to remember the door that began with the season of Advent not so long ago.

How have we been changed through the journey of Advent, Christmas and Epiphany this year?

Are we coming home to relationships of justice and mutuality where we see differently, both personally and politically?

Transfiguration reminds us that religion requires intentional spiritual engagement to bring us to an awareness of life. And that the role of religion is to transform the world, to come to see the world as God sees the world and to bring it as close as we can to God's vision of the world. What God changes, God changes through us.

Real religion is not about transcending life; real religion is about transforming life. About changing how we see, and letting love change everything.

Now, with some words and images, I invite you to remember your journey through Advent, Christmas and Epiphany. The journey that has brought us here ... together.

Then followed a series of images which can be seen at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vgqB2wRB4z0> accompanied by the words below.

Starry Night Vincent Van Gogh

*And good folk travelling by the light of star-fields,
and an ache in their shoes,
discover the Aha that fills the universe,
and we travel on.*

Peaceable Kingdom John August Swanson

*From the prophetic mountains,
the people of God move ever onward into the light,
trusting, believing, longing in the holy,
calling us through,
and we travel on.*

Okoné Paul Woei

*And from the word of a mother,
comes a new light for the world,
shaped in the hope of God's fulfilling justice,
and we travel on.*

We Saw His Glory Iris Hahs Hoefstetter

*That birth light of a new life in the world,
lighting our footprints as we gathered round,
the sound of promise filling the moment,
and we travel on.*

Holy Land – Taqi Sabateen

*Through baptism water the movement continues,
from heaven to earth and beyond,
in blessing and assurance, comes the voice for the beloved,
and we travel on.*

Mount Tabor

*The hazy light of a journey long travelled,
our footsteps long disappeared as we travelled the mountain of God,
the echo of prophets still in our ears,
and we travel on.*

Amen