

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 27 APRIL 2014

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Deuteronomy 6: 1-9; Psalm 89; Matthew 28: 16-20

“A New King”

In the paper, I saw a photograph of people gathered at the Dawn Service in Turkey, in Gallipoli. All rugged up in sleeping bags, beanies, scarves and gloves. I didn't see any pictures of the Dawn Service in Melbourne on Friday, but I heard from one of my children, who attended with a group of friends, that they had also been all rugged up, and that it had been really cold, but “worth it”.

When I tried to find out what “worth it” meant, I got shrugs and silence. “You wouldn't understand Mum, it's just nice, with friends, we had breakfast after”.

That sounded a bit like the person that, in a discussion group at Church, once answered the question, “Why do you go to Church?” with “to meet my friends at morning tea”.

Wouldn't it be easier to meet friends for morning tea on Sunday morning without getting up early for worship? Like so many others do? Find a spot somewhere with nice views of the bay, or bush, at the footy, or somewhere in the city and do some shopping after?

Wouldn't it have been easier to get up an hour later on Friday morning, 6 o'clock instead of 5, and found a lovely spot in the sun somewhere for breakfast and get home earlier with plenty of time to spare? Or travel somewhere else than to a fairly ordinary looking, cold beach in Turkey if you've got a couple of thousand dollars to spare?

There must be something more to it than “just because it's nice” or “just to meet up with friends for breakfast or morning tea”.....

But what?

Youngsters are too embarrassed to talk about it, and so are many of you who come to Church every Sunday morning. In conversation, when asked, most of you will find it difficult to say what exactly it is that brings you here, like youngsters that go to the Dawn Service will shrug and sigh. Of course there is the morning tea, and the friends, and the habit of going...

But is there more? I would like to propose there is. That there is more that attracts all those thousands to the Dawn Service than just meeting up with friends. And that there is more to going to Church than morning tea, friends, habit, good music or even an hour of quiet.

There is something. There is an experience. Something, an experience that is often so intimate and personal, but also elusive, that we find it difficult to talk about it. To put it into words. To identify and own up to what it actually is that happens for us, at the Dawn Service, or in a Church service. What makes us come, longing, hoping that something inside us will be touched? That we will be moved.

How and why that moving, that touching, that experiencing happens is hard to put a finger on. It's beyond us, beyond our control and beyond the day to day. It's something “more”, “different”, “deep” and if we try to specify it further we will more often than not start to stutter. Because it is hard to explain in ordinary day-to-day language. It soon sounds trite, or stupid, or naive, or...

I imagine that Jesus' disciples travelling to Galilee were feeling very much like people travelling to Gallipoli for an "experience". After the crucifixion, and after those first, disturbing glimpses of a Jesus that was not as dead as they'd thought he was, they were not sure what they were actually looking for, hoping for an "experience", a revelation perhaps, something profound, hoping to be touched and moved and changed, maybe. And a bit unsettled at the same time because of what it might mean if they were really to experience something earth-shattering and life-changing.

They would have wondered if they were ready and open to whatever it was, whatever it meant, those glimpses of a living Jesus?

Travelling with friends may have made it easier, and then it may not have. What if their experience is not the same as yours? What if they "get it" and you don't? Or vice versa? Others can be threatening to have around when people experience something beyond themselves, or they can provide much-needed stability, a feeling of safety, support and comfort. Being in a group can intensify the experience, or it can make it more scary and unnerving, and most of the time you won't know what it is going to be until you get there.

According to the gospels, it is a small, intimate, group of friends that travels to Galilee after the resurrection. They know each other well, and we may assume that this would have made the group relatively safe, and that they would probably have been relatively confident that whatever was to happen next, they were likely to be able to deal with it as a group. That they would be able to hold on to each other, like they had held on to each other through the time they had travelled the countryside with Jesus and the ordeal of his conviction and crucifixion in Jerusalem. They were the hard core group. The true faithfuls. The ones who had stayed through the night. Eleven best friends.

The women, the first witnesses to the resurrection, don't seem to be there on this trip. The suggestion is that they didn't need to come. They had had their experience already and they'd gone out, to joyfully share the news with whoever wanted to hear it. It's the men who are still looking, in need of another, more conclusive experience than the enthusiasm and faith of the women can provide them with.

They head back to the mountain, the same mountain where they'd heard Jesus lay down a new interpretation of the law in the beatitudes. The mountain where some of them, later on, had experienced the transfiguration, and seen Jesus on a par with Moses and Elijah. They come wondering and insecure. After the stories of the women, after the empty grave, now what?

Did they spend the night there, in the first century equivalent of a sleeping bag? Rugged up in their cloaks, warm woolly scarves wrapped around their heads? Remembering their past experiences and other mountain experiences they knew from the scriptures? Moses on Mount Sinai, Elijah before he is taken up to heaven, Daniel who sees the son of Man descending to a mountain? Isaiah who prophesies about the nations coming to the mountain of the Lord at the end of time?

None of the gospel writers tell us about the details, about how they felt and what they thought. They leave it to our imagination to figure that one out, assuming we've been through similar experiences and will not find it hard to imagine what it must have been like, journeying from Jerusalem to Galilee, climbing the mountain, hoping, looking for an experience, something. Hoping to be touched, moved, hoping to receive a revelation, see some light. Hesitant and not too confident.

The gospel writers do not go into the detail of that. What they do is try to describe what happens next. Try to find words for the bit that we all generally find so difficult to put into words.

Each of the gospel writers does that in their own way, with stories that vary wildly across the four accounts. Stories that are impossible to harmonise. So contradictory and different that it is impossible to bring them together into one, clear, consistent story. Not because they each had access to different memories, but because they each try, in hindsight, to put an experience into words that is beyond words, and defies reason.

I am sure every person that was at the Dawn Service on Friday, here or in Gallipoli, would also describe what they experienced, if they are game to try, differently. Using words and imagery they will all feel doesn't quite describe what it was that they experienced, what was at the core of it for them. Words and imagery that will have come from their own, unique background, personal history and context.

Matthew, as I've said before, comes to the telling of his story from a Jewish background. Jewish words and imagery have been part of his upbringing, his context and personal history since the beginning. He knows the scriptures inside out, and not only the scriptures, he knows the literature, the culture, the religious and spiritual soul of his people better than most. He assumes his audience also does. He uses those words and these images to tell the story; the story of Jesus, right up until that moment where words fail....

It was on a mountain, he tells us, that last bit, it must have been, even if it wasn't. Wasn't that where all the turning points of Jesus' career had taken place? Where he gave a new law to the people, just like Moses did all those years ago? The mountain top where they had seen him transfigured, conversing with Moses and Elijah as an equal. Where they heard God's voice affirming him as his son?

He uses the language and imagery of enthronement rituals. Ancient rituals that surrounded the enthronement of a new king. Identification and affirmation of authority, acclamation, universal recognition, a program for the reign, a sending out of subjects. Patterns found in many of the psalms, in the books of Kings and Chronicles, and elsewhere in scripture. And Matthew's audience would have understood: This is a king coming to his throne. The son of David, what the genealogy at the beginning of the gospel started to spell out, is coming to fulfilment here. A king, with a program, worshipped by his subjects, sending them out to do his will.

Connecting back to the beginning, it is not only the enthronement of a King that Matthew weaves into the closing paragraphs of his gospel. There is other imagery as well, other parts of the story that come to their fulfilment here. They bring past, present and future together, tying past memories to present experience, opening a new perspective of what the future might hold.

Remember the wise men who came from the East, representing the nations, bringing homage to a baby a few hours old. Remember the echoes of Isaiah's prophecies of the nations coming to the mountain of the Lord to see the miracle of his love? Now the grown-up king commands his disciples to go down that mountain, into the world, and invite the nations into their midst and welcome them as new participants in the ongoing story of God with his people.

At the beginning of the gospel, soldiers slaughter the children of Bethlehem, leaving their mothers without comfort. Now those same soldiers lie dead while the new Davidic King strolls out of the grave with a message of love, compassion and comfort for those who thought all was lost.

Opposite the kings and armies of his day, Matthew places another King, on his way to gather a very different army around him.

Finally, after 28 chapters, the new David meets his destiny here, and so does the new Moses. A new commandment is given. A commandment no longer restricted to the Jews, but open to the world, to the nations. A commandment to disciple, to baptise, to teach.

They are to disciple, to teach the subject of this new King. A word akin to the word discipline. They are to bring the new discipline of this King to the nations. A discipline of love, of compassion, of healing, of grace, of peace.

They are to use water, and not the knife, to mark the welcoming of people into this new discipline. Water, connected to the realm of death and the underworld in their way of thinking, changed through Jesus'

triumph into an agent of cleansing, forgiveness, nurture. A sign of the transforming power this king has, even over the forces of evil and death.

And they are to teach, to hand on the way of Jesus, to never stop learning how it is done, what it means, how it can be understood, in which way it can, and will, transform life and guide the way.

The disciples are sent out. Their experience becomes more than a private, intimate encounter with the beyond. It is an experience that launches them onto a journey. That changes their hesitation and wavering confidence into a desire to share the core of that experience to such an extent that in two or three generations there will be enough of them to sway the Roman empire into adopting their way as THE way.

Words for the experience itself they will never find. Meeting the living Christ is an experience that will repeat itself generation after generation, without anybody, ever, succeeding in finding words that will describe it adequately. Some will take words from Psalms, like Psalm 89, which we read this morning:

20 I have found my servant David;
with my holy oil I have anointed him;
21 my hand shall always remain with him;
my arm also shall strengthen him.
22 The enemy shall not outwit him,
the wicked shall not humble him.
23 I will crush his foes before him
and strike down those who hate him.
24 My faithfulness and steadfast love shall be with him;
and in my name his horn shall be exalted.
25 I will set his hand on the sea
and his right hand on the rivers.
26 He shall cry to me, 'You are my Father,
my God, and the Rock of my salvation!'
27 I will make him the firstborn,
the highest of the kings of the earth.
28 Forever I will keep my steadfast love for him,

Others will use other ancient words, worshipping a Lord that to them has put flesh and bone on the ancient words from Deuteronomy that are so important to their Jewish brothers and sisters: 5 You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. 6 Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. 7 Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. 8 and my covenant with him will stand firm.

Others yet again will write poems, paint, sculpt or sing to give expression to what is really beyond human words and understanding.

That God's steadfast love is forever and his steadfast love is for all generations. That it is wider than we can ever imagine, deeper than the deepest ocean, higher than the highest mountain, stronger than death itself, a whispering breath and a raging storm.

There are no words to describe the resurrection, the encounter with the living Christ that changes the way we look at the world, changes who we are and what we stand for, except that somehow it does.

Easter doesn't mean anything if it does not change us, if it does not discipline us into the service of this King, the acceptance of his law, the recognition of his power, the living of his life.

Just like Anzac day doesn't mean anything if it doesn't engender the desire for peace, if it doesn't lead to less death, and if it doesn't make us more determined to try to bring wholeness and healing where war ravages our earth.

Resurrection and remembrance. They are words, and they are experiences that call us to action, to life, to change, to the worship of that which brings life, and love, and peace to the nations.

If they fail to make a difference, to our life and to the life of the world around us, we might as well be dead and buried with our heroes or our Messiah.

Amen.