

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 22 FEBRUARY 2009

Rev. Vladimir Korotkov

Mark 9: 2-9

“The Transfiguration: The Entry of the “Things that are not” into “the Things that are””

“God is the beyond in the midst of life.” **Dietrich Bonhoeffer** cited in

“The ingression of ‘things that are not’ into the ‘things that are’.

Paul Lehmann, *The Transfiguration of Politics*, p 76

1. The "things that are"

Ukraine

Village of Chervoy

25 January 1933

Since Maria had decided to die, her cat would have to fend for itself. She'd already cared for it far beyond the point where keeping a pet made any sense. Rats and mice had long since been trapped and eaten by villagers. Domestic animals had disappeared shortly after that. All except for one, this cat, her companion which she'd kept hidden. Why hadn't she killed it? She needed something to live for; something to protect and love – something to survive for. She'd made a promise to continue feeding it up until the day she could no longer feed herself. That was today. She'd already cut her leather boots into thin strips, boiled them with nettles and beetroot seeds. She'd dug for earthworms, sucked on bark. This morning in a feverish delirium she'd gnawed the leg of her kitchen stool ...

Tom Rob Smith, *Child 44*, p 1

Maria's story, which begins Tom Rob Smith's novel *Child 44*, a thriller set in Stalinist Russia in the 1950s, is based on real events. It is my mother's story, as she was nine years old in 1933, an orphan, living in a village in the Ukraine. Millions of Ukrainians suffered and many died in the massive famine that struck the Soviet Union in 1932-33.

2. The entry of “things that are not”

Within this disaster and suffering, “the things that are”, partly caused by government actions, people not only survived but some experienced transfiguring moments which sustained them. Let me relate one such event in my mother's life.

In her later years of life, my mother began to open up and share some of her early life as an orphan in the Ukraine. My parents seldom spoke of the ‘old days’ of horror: of famine, of living in an oppressive regime, about the taking of their parents into Gulags, about the war. I have only realised through my reading of psychoanalysis that families deeply traumatised by such experiences would avoid speaking about them; that the parents lived with an ongoing anxiety related to their devastating suffering; and that children identified with their parents and their anxiety without knowing what they should be anxious about.

This is my mother's transfiguring experience. She was 17. It was 1941. The Nazi German army was

invading Kiev, the capital of the Ukraine. She was alone. She was an orphan from the age of three due to the great famine. She described the terror of buildings being blown up, burning, and having to keep running and hiding from soldiers, being hungry, vulnerable, alone. Later, one Russian soldier who was part of an advanced unit found her, kept moving her, returning to take her to safe buildings, and gave her food. Within this horror, she related to us, she had a deep sense that she was protected by something greater than herself, which comforted her.

Within “the things that are”, the horror of war, emerged “the things that are not”, an awareness of the value and protection of her life.

3. Transfiguring moments are common to all human beings

If we reflect on our own lives, we realise that we have had similar experiences. Transfiguring moments are common to all human beings.

We can also be transfigured within and through experiences of awe.

I have been a surfboard rider for many years, and I will never forget one event that filled me with wonder. As I paddled out on the coast of Western Australia very early in the morning, just as the sun was half-rising over the hills at my back, I looked up and I saw the moon large and half-sunk on the ocean’s horizon in front of me. I was filled with unspeakable awe and gratefulness for life.

Abraham Maslow, the American psychologist famous for his ‘hierarchy of needs’, described and thus interpreted such experiences as peak experiences in his work, *Religions, Values and Peak Experiences* [found at <http://www.timebon.com/PeakExperiences.html>]:

“sudden feelings of intense happiness and well-being, possibly the awareness of an ‘ultimate truth’ and the unity of all things ... the experience fills the individual with wonder and awe. ...[of] feeling at one with the world, and at peace with it....”.

And, he added, it sustains and empowers us in our lives. They become overwhelmingly significant stories for us.

4. The story of the transfiguration of Jesus offers a unique contribution to the common discourse of transfiguring moments.

Our various faith and secular traditions shape our interpretations of our transfiguring experiences.

My mother, many years after her transfiguring event as a seventeen year old, interpreted that experience as a transfiguring moment in which the God of Jesus cared for her. She sensed the beyond in the midst of chaotic and dehumanising life, to use Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s words.

The story of Transfiguration in Mark’s Gospel, Mark 9: 2-9, offers a unique contribution to this common discourse of transfiguring moments in personal, spiritual and social life.

In this story Jesus takes three disciples up a high mountain, where his appearance changes, his clothes become a dazzling white and the prophet Elijah and Moses appear and start talking to Jesus. The disciples are overwhelmed. Then a cloud covers them and voice from the cloud tells them to that Jesus is “my beloved Son”, listen to him.

There are many unhelpful and incorrect interpretations of this event. It is important to understand

this story in its ancient Jewish context and its place in Mark's Gospel so as to avoid projecting our own cultural, theological and personal ideas into it. Ancient listeners would understand the images and symbols from Old Testament stories.

The Greek word for 'transfiguration' is *metamorphousthai*, which means, to be changed.

In this story, Mark combines these familiar images to transfigure the normal Jewish symbolic understanding, to present what Jesus and God are about, and what following or faith means for our own contexts. This includes what society and politics, as engagement in public life, ought to be. Mark's story brings together past traditions, of Moses, Elijah and Daniel and places them into relationship with the present.

5. Sr. Joan Chittister, a Benedictine nun and a social psychologist, and works in a national resource centre for contemporary spirituality, spoke on ABC Radio National a few years ago on "The role of real religion from the perspective of the Transfiguration". Here are a few of her key comments:

"In the story of the Transfiguration ...The apostles got a brand-new insight into whom this Jesus really was -- dazzling, consuming, literally enlightening. ... at the top of that mountain [they experience the] unexpected and certainly the disturbing. ... Peter ... opted for piety. "Let's settle down here, Jesus, and build three booths." ...Peter ... was opting for a religion of temples, institutions and shrines. ... for a religion that transcends the world, but ... before he could even finish speaking, God interrupted and said, "Listen." Then something happens that we too often forget. ... Jesus ... takes the apostles away from visions, away from privatised religion, to meet the ones who needed them most in the town.

Jesus himself leads them down to the bottom of that mountain to the hurting people, unbelieving officials, the ineffective institutions and the demons below.

Real religion is about healing hurts, speaking for and being with the poor, the helpless, the voiceless and the forgotten who are at the silent bottom of every pinnacle, every hierarchy and every system in both state and church....

Real religion, the scripture insists, is not about transcending life; real religion is about our transforming life.

The gospel of the transfiguration ... calls us to become enlightened; calls us to change our attitudes about the role of religion; calls us to understand the nature of religion itself; because the so-called rational has failed.

... Transfiguration means that the role of religion demands enlightenment. The role of religion is to bring us to an awareness of life. 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 to the vision of God as we possibly can.

Why? Scripture is very clear. What God changes, God changes through us."

6. Joan Chittister calls our attention to the holistic nature of the Christian faith. Mark presents a Jesus who is concerned with the spiritual, ethical, political and religious aspects and ideals of a new humanity, a transfigured society of individuals in caring, empowered communities of difference.

The words "This is my beloved child, Listen to him", represents the voice of the God hidden in the

cloud – never seen or controlled by humanity, or controlling and manipulating humanity. A God beyond yet ever present in the midst of life, loving, forgiving and luring us even in the most traumatic places and times.

Added to this is the invitation to listen to the new message of love and justice, and suffering love: that is, Jesus central message in Mark 8, in the section just before the transfiguration story, about taking up one's cross, which is about commitment to the work of suffering compassion and love, not a masochistic road, but for sake of life and freedom.

When Jesus meets with Elijah and Moses, symbolic figures of Jewish faith, society and nation, he represents the new form of humanity with changed values and social identity and political expression and a transformed and transforming relationship with God. It announces the presence of a new way of being: new power, new formation of social and cultural space for the freedom of all.

It announce the transvaluation of values: the turning of accepted values inside out: the hatred of an enemy is replaced with the practice of love. (Paul Lehmann, p 74)

It stresses the transformation of power: conflict between nations, groups or individuals is dealt with by negotiation instead of military might and economic power. (Paul Lehmann, p 74)

Conclusion

Transfiguring experiences are common to all human beings, cultures and religions. They empower, enlighten and sustain us in different ways. They are not exclusive to Christianity. Yet, Christianity does have its own unique and holistic story, which can be shared in respectful dialogue.

Christian faith is about recognising that God is constantly seeking to re-order and transfigure personal and larger power: of political life, social and cultural arrangements for the freedom and benefit of all. Faith is about this radical following of Jesus. It means to be in step with the hidden, unseen future, "the things that are not", influencing the present, "the things that are" including our hearts, communities and our nation.