

## **NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH**

### **TRANSFIGURATION OF JESUS**

**SUNDAY 19 FEBRUARY 2012**

**Rev. Anneke Oppewal**

**2 Kings 2: 1-12; Luke 9: 28-36**

#### **“To be Transfigured”**

As Jesus was praying he was transfigured. "As"! Somehow that one little word kept buzzing around in my brain as I read the story for this week. It wasn't just that they'd climbed a mountain and were struck by the silence, or the beautiful view (all of which can be found on Mount Tabor). It wasn't just that they were worshipping together, or were having a meal together, or relaxing after a strenuous time where they'd been putting in some hard yards. It's not even that after reading from the scriptures and reflecting on the great heroes and stories of old they feel closer to God than they have ever before.

It is AS Jesus is praying.

And it is as JESUS is praying. They are not praying together. They are not entering into a peak experience together. They are not whipped into an altered state of consciousness by their leader. They, the disciples, are just watching as it happens. They see Jesus transfigured, as he prays.

Something out of the ordinary happens while Jesus is praying. And it is something which is visible from the outside.

It made me think of people I have seen transfigured by prayer over the years. My grandmother, years ago, changed when she was talking to God. A quiet calm came over her and her face started to glow with an intimate warmth that made me, even at a very young age, sit still and wait, hoping she would go on and on like that for ever.

I also remember our Sunday school teacher getting that relaxed, totally at ease look on her face when she would talk to God using words we all understood, but loading them with meaning that went much further than we could fathom.

I remember in my first field placement, when visiting a man who was in the terminal phases of cancer with his wife, how they glided into the realm of the divine presence taking me with them. They told me later they were used to praying together, and had intensified that practice over the time of his illness and found enormous comfort in it. And here was I, in my late twenties, not sure what to say or do, taken by them into a place where I, for the first time, had a taste of what prayer can mean if practiced faithfully and consistently.

And so I've come across many transfigurations over the years, especially at times where I have prayed with or for others in difficult situations. Finishing a pastoral conversation with prayer I'll sometimes catch a glimpse of it in the person I am with. Praying or laying on hands in hospice or hospital the air may suddenly thicken with something I can't put a name on.

I never had more than a deep feeling of connectedness and warmth until I joined the Charismatic movement for a while in the eighties. Until on a retreat where we had classes in speaking in tongues (yes you can have classes in that, believe it or not), I felt a barrier be removed and my mind explode

into what really was an altered state of consciousness where all my senses changed and I felt the divine come so close I didn't know how fast to open my eyes and find my way back to normal. It was frightening. I never forgot the experience though. And when I read stories like the transfiguration, or other stories about visions and the like in scripture I always wonder if it was anything like that.

As Jesus was PRAYING.

With prayer, in prayer, something changes. Jesus changes. He becomes one with the faith heroes of old. Moses, Elijah, probably the two most important saints of his time appear to be around him, so intense is the change in his appearance to the disciples. His praying, his transforming, causes them to have a group vision, a group peak experience. Jesus does not pray for them to have this vision. It is what they see AS he prays. They see something at work in and around him that connects him to the giants of old. Wow....

This is where they want to be, this is where they want to stay.

Up till now they have been struggling to understand who Jesus is and what he has come to do. Time and time again we are told that they miss the point, don't get what Jesus is about, stumble and struggle with their discipleship and here, on top of the mountain, suddenly the veil lifts... Jesus is up there with the greatest of their faith, on a level with Moses and Elijah, surrounded by the transforming glow of the divine.

"Let's stay here" says Peter, always spontaneous, practical and down to earth. "Let's build some tents". The writer of the gospel winks at us with all these references of course. Who else went up a mountain to talk to God and had the glory of God reflect off his face? Who else was building a tent to contain God's glory? Moses of course! Who prayed fire down from heaven on this same mountain? Who went up to heaven in a chariot of fire, the glory of God all around him? Elijah of course.

"Let's stay here and build tents" says Peter. I like what I see, I like being so close, I like the feeling that I understand, that I am seeing the divine revealing itself. "Let us stay".

I visited Mount Tabor years ago on a trip to Israel. When we arrived at the bottom we could not see the top because it was raining and a grey, low hanging cloud was covering it. We struggled up the mountain and got soaked on the way, with me wondering if it was really necessary to go through this extent of suffering to retrace Jesus' steps and get a feeling for what it was really like back then. There wouldn't have been tour busses at the foot of the mountain, or food stalls his day anyway, so the experience was never going to be the same. And we could have taken a bus up. We arrived at the top exhausted, wet and grumpy, knowing that we had the descent to look forward to. Here we were, in the cloud, even more grey and wet than it had looked and felt from below.

Until, suddenly, for only a couple of minutes, the cloud lifted and we could see the glorious views of the plain below. For a few moments that mountain top was transfigured, and we with it. Wet and miserable though we were, we'd been rewarded with a glimpse of what that original experience may have been like. The veil lifting, the air suddenly clearing, and the view changing beyond recognition.

Life and faith can be like that. Struggling uphill, feeling exhausted and miserable and wondering if it is all worth it. The climb, the trouble. And then, suddenly, catching a glimpse of something beyond expectation or understanding.

That may happen as we climb a real, physical mountain or spend time on a beautiful beach, watching a magnificent dawn or sunset. It may happen watching the face of someone else

transfigure as they come close to God and relax into something so private and intimate and special it puts them on a level with the saints of old. It may happen when we open our own hearts and minds in prayer and somehow, often unexpectedly and surprisingly make a connection with something beyond our understanding.

Experiences that fill us with awe, with a desire to build tents and hold on as long as we can.

But that is not how it works. These experiences are there to move us on, not to keep us where we are. Jesus and his disciples have to journey on after sharing this intense moment of prayer. Elisha needs to journey on without Elijah after his vision of seeing him travel into the heavens on a fiery chariot. The disciples will be as clumsy and full of incomprehension as they have been before. Elisha will battle on with the misunderstanding and lack of faith of his contemporaries. Nothing changes *except* that these experiences stand out like beacons along the way, telling us that as we pray, as we open ourselves to the divine, something changes, something transfigures, in us, but also in others.

Wanting to hold on to these moments, or trying to repeat them, is refusing to continue to journey, to trust that there will, that there can be more and better. That we can grow further into God's presence as we go. The fear of losing what has been keeping us from opening ourselves for what is still to come.

In our Church, in our congregation, a lot of tent building is happening. And that is logical. We are a grieving congregation. Grieving for all the wonderful experiences and transfigurations of the past. Longing to repeat the experiences we've had, to recreate the atmosphere, the condition under which we have come close to God before, have experienced love and light before. Longing for the familiar. Wanting everything to stay the same, or at least remain familiar enough for us to feel at home.

I think that is part of the long winding road Elijah takes Elisha on before he departs. To give Elisha time to accept that this is how it is, that his beloved teacher will no longer be with him and that things will change for him forever. I also believe this is what Peter is trying to do when he suggests building tents. Postpone the moment of letting go and moving on.

That moment comes though. And look at the journey that follows. Peter would never have gotten to Easter and beyond had they stayed on that mountain top. Good Friday would not have come, nor Easter Sunday, nor Pentecost for that matter. Elisha would never have grown up to be a great prophet in his own right had Elijah stayed around. He has to take up the mantle that is thrown to him and continue, even with the sadness of loss and the fear of the unknown that is ahead of him in his heart.

And so do we. Trusting that we will be transfigured as we pray, that we will see each other and our community transfigured, as we pray, trusting that we will see the living Christ transfigure the world as he lives and prays on, in us, through us, beside, behind and before us in the deep unfathomable mystery of faith as we pray and travel on. Amen.