

SERMON – THE TRANSFIGURATION

We've just heard 3 momentous biblical passages, all of them featuring mountain top experiences for Elijah, Moses and the disciples with Jesus. As we know, in scripture, mountains are places where the heavenly and earthly realm intersect. Where God's presence and revelation is experienced, and always in powerful and life transforming, *transfiguring* ways.

The Transfiguration really is a pivotal moment for Jesus and the disciples, But would also be fair to say, that it's right up there as one of the biblical happenings that challenges the modern rationalistic sensibilities.

We have lived through an age that insists we should only believe *anything* is truly '*real*' if it can be seen, measured, tested and proven in a lab. But the Transfiguration confronts all of us to consider, and explore, the deeper dimensions of reality that exist outside of the confines of our normal understandings. The something '*more*' the something '*beyond*'.

And this is what I want to do today.

Because what happens to Moses, Elijah and the 3 disciples is that they have their eyes opened to something '*other*' something '*greater*' than their selves. They became more aware; more alert to the deeper God dimensions **present in their earthly reality**. And in this experience, they became more transformed, more *transfigured* in their faith. And they are never the same people again.

"Transfiguration" means a change of form or appearance into a more beautiful or spiritual state. For me this is the power and the truth of our Christian faith.

Which I believe, is WHY we're seeing an increasing awareness among so many, that the purely mechanistic rationalist narrative we've been offered has been tried, tested and found wanting.

We intuitively recognise that there are deeper dimensions to our earthly reality, something '*other*', that can elevate and enrich our human experience.

And all of this is perfectly captured in this poem by Mary Oliver.

It's a poem I began my Christmas Eve sermon 2 years ago and I want to re-visit it again because I believe it has so much to say for the cultural age we now live in. Here's the poem.



I have refused to live locked in the orderly house of reasons and proofs.

The world I live in and believe in is wider than that.

And anyway, what's wrong with *Maybe*?

You wouldn't believe what once or twice I have seen.

I'll just tell you this:

only if there are angels in your head, will you ever, possibly, see one.

As I try to resist the spiritual darkness this truth has become my mantra.

Only if we believe that there is a deeper reality with the possibilities of God always at work, can we ever hope to see it.

Only if we believe that the heavenly realm is constantly intersecting with this earthly realm in all sorts of ways that can elevate and enrich our human experience, can we ever hope to know it.

All of us have experienced 'God moments' in life that make us want to say to anyone who would listen ... **'You wouldn't believe what once or twice I have seen.'**

Breakthrough moments when we just **'know'** that the presence of God has opened our eyes and our hearts to the deeper dimensions. Sharpened our sense of awareness to the beauty that illuminates

These breakthrough moments free us from **the orderly house of JUST reason and proof**. They help us to realise that the world we live in has **a wider more expansive reality** to reveal to us. As Emily Dickison once said... we can ***"dwell in possibility."***



What marks these experiences is that they're very hard to describe. They are so hard to capture in mere words, but we just know this experience is very 'REAL' because they touch the very essence of who we are. Of what it means to be 'human'. We glimpse that there's something ***more*** to this world, that can only be glimpsed ***through*** this world

- It might be that experience on the beach, the beauty of the waves and stunning sunset.
- The sense of peace we experience in the sacred stillness of a forest walk and the living presence of trees.
- An inspired conversation where a light of insight breaks through, as if from another realm.
- I still remember the indescribable pleasure of holding one of my sleeping children close to my chest and I could feel their heartbeat against mine. I had an overwhelming sense of love and protection towards them.
- Who among us hasn't experienced the inexpressible joy of being moved to tears by a piece of sublime music or any expression of the artistic.
- I certainly experienced it yesterday at the grave of 12 year old Tarore and the story of Wiremu Tamihana
- And how many of us have had the actual physical mountain top experience where you've surveyed the awe-inspiring grandeur of God's majestic creation.

I was once on a mountain top in Spain on an incredibly clear day and in front of me as far as the eye could see, was this jaw dropping view of the whole Pyrenees mountain range. It was a revelation of God's beauty that's forever imprinted in my mind's eye. As was seeing Mt Taranaki from the top of Mt Ruapehu on a clear day a few years aback.

And how many of us have experienced this in times of prayer?

Where for once, all the usual distractions fall away, and you find yourself in a place of tangible intimacy with God. There's just you and God. One to one and you just *know* your 'beloved-ness'.

All of these experiences are the heavenly intersecting with the earthly. We glimpse that there's something *more* to this world, that can only be glimpsed *through* this world. And all of this is contained in the deep truth of the Transfiguration.

So let's go through the scripture and ask how it can speak to you and I today.

What's the first thing we hear about the disciples mountain top experience?

Jesus took Peter, James, and John up on a mountain *to pray*.

How often in scripture do we see the centrality of prayer as a pathway to having our eyes opened to the deeper presence of God? And how often do we fail to grasp the full significance for our lives?

It's not that our prayer is going to compel God to break through, **but prayer is a kind of alertness**. Prayer shapes us to be more alive and awake to the breakthrough of the heavenly realm into our ordinary experience. **Prayer is paying attention.**

The beauty of prayer is that it has many pathways of expression. It *can* be in the dramatic of the earthquake, wind and fire, but as Elijah found, it can also come in the *tender whisper*.

Then we hear these words. **"While Jesus was praying his face changed in appearance and His clothing became dazzling white."** The Greek here is **"metamorphosis,"**

'Meta' means beyond - **'morphe'** means form. Jesus went beyond the form that he had. It's important to note that Jesus doesn't lose his humanity. He keeps his human form. But something **'beyond'** - something *more* 'appeared.' Divinity within His humanity

We're told that Peter and the other two disciples have fallen asleep and it's when they **'wake up'** that they see this revelation. **Spiritually speaking, isn't this how life can be for all of us?**

We can get so caught up in this world of distraction that spiritually we are asleep.

Transfiguration happens when we are *awake* to the possibilities of God all around us and within us. As Paul says, **"Awake, O sleeper, and rise from the dead, and Christ will give you light."**

And it's in this *awakening* that the disciples witness the remarkable vision of Jesus.

Transformed in appearance – clothes turning to dazzling white - in conversation with two of the greatest figures of the Old Testament. Moses representing the Law and Elijah the Prophets.

Who then disappear at the sound of God's voice declaring ... **This is my son, my chosen one, listen to Him.** God declaring **the One** who must always be our ultimate spiritual authority. Jesus Christ. "As Jesus told us ... The Law and the Prophets fulfilled and completed in HIM.

Now this is deeply profound stuff, and I want to bring our one more truth from this for our everyday lives.

Whenever we have these transfiguration experiences, what they are revealing to us – **is the Eternal Realm breaking into the here and now**. What we're intuitively recognising, is the presence of the Christ who is the same yesterday, today and forever.

Moses lived around 1,400 years before Jesus and Elijah around 900 years. But here is God's Eternal presence gathering up all the threads of God's faithful people - and all the wisdom of the ages- into a moment of transforming revelation.

Isn't this a powerful reminder to you and me today that when the '**Divine More**' breaks through, we get access to the Eternal Realm. We are always connected to the tradition of those who have gone before us. The cloud of faithful witnesses.

And all of us on the Pilgrimage yesterday witnessed the truth of this completely. Wirumu Tamihana and 12-year old Tarore may have lived over 200 years ago in the past, but yesterday they were fully present and alive in our hearts and minds. Their lives and legacy *transfigured* our imaginations.



My final take away point is this.

As I said earlier, this mountain top experience is a pivotal moment for the disciples.

Up to now they've known Jesus as friend, rabbi and respected teacher. But now they see Jesus for who he truly is. And they can never be the same again.

Now they will see their day-to-day reality through a different lens. And this is as true for us today as it was for them.

No matter how good the mountain top experience is for the disciples - Jesus refuses to let them turn it into a 'memorial'.

He brings the disciples back down from the mountain, into the marketplace, to face the rigours and challenges of everyday life. The difference is that this experience of the '**Divine More**' has changed them.

And this is the calling of our own faith formation.

We bring these moments that elevate and enrich our human experience, (in whatever expression they arrive) back into the marketplace of our own lives.

MY STORY

I want to draw this altogether by sharing a personal story of my own experience of this. It happened not long after coming to faith through the Alpha course around the year 2001 while still a novice Christian.

In 20 years of preaching I've never shared this before because (1) it's very hard to articulate and capture in mere words. And (2) it's just never felt an appropriate time to share.

But I guess the mystery of The Transfiguration - and the truth of those words from poet Mary Oliver... **'You wouldn't believe what once or twice I have seen.'** Makes it feel the right moment.



My vicar at the time was the Rev Iain Gow and he asked me to come with him on a silent retreat to Stanbrook Abbey in the Worcestershire countryside. At that time, it was nunnery with the sisters living there but a small part of it was available for retreats.

We began the 3 days with a quiet moment of reflection, and the spiritual director gave us a passage of scripture to chew on for the 3 days.

As each hour went by, I could sense myself letting go of the various layers of distraction and agitation that daily life keeps us bound to. By day three I was definitely experiencing a feeling of centredness and openness.

At the end of each day, I attended the service of Compline which I'd never heard of, but it was a beautifully simple time of prayer and the nuns singing acapella. Which in itself sounded like the heavenly intersecting with the earthly.

What made it all the more affecting was that you wasn't allowed in the main church space as the nuns. I sat in a small side chapel where you could hear the nuns but not see them.

Knowing they were there but not being able to see them, just added to the sense of the Holy, the 'Divine Other'. The beyond.

On the third day I went back to my room, lay on the bed and began to pray. I had an overwhelming sense of peace ... and then very suddenly and unexpectedly I felt my body jolt and rise up towards a stain glass window high up on the wall.

As I was moving towards it, I actually felt exhilarated and I found myself saying "take me Jesus take me". Now If you'd known me at this time, you'd know this wasn't the kind of language I used.

But then I came back to my lying position on the bed trying to process what had just happened. I checked I wasn't in some kind of sleep state- but 'no' I was definitely awake, aware and alert.

And then exactly the same thing happened for a second time.

I felt taken up towards the window and I wanted to go through the window because I sensed I was being taken to something more, something beyond, and I kept saying "take me Jesus, take me."

But again, I came back down to the bed - it happened one more time - and then came to an end. The next morning, I talked with Rev Iain Gow about it, and I prayed and processed it.

As with any profound experience, it's always there and sometimes I go back to it and process it with the wisdom of hindsight. I've never had this kind of experience since, so I definitely don't want to present this as me having non-stop dramatic mountain top experiences.

But here's how I see it as I stand here now.

What I recognised at the time was this was me essentially **'surrendering'** all that I had to Jesus. 'Take me Jesus take me whenever you would have me go'.

But I also believe it was God waking me up from my spiritual sleep. The Holy Spirit making me more awake, more alert, more aware of the **Christ who is in all things at all times**. And like the disciples I was forever changed by this experience.

It showed me that there ARE deeper dimensions to reality than I ever thought possible. Something 'other, something 'beyond'. It opened my eyes to the presence of the God and the Sacred in all the rigours and challenges of daily life. The challenges never go away - but now I can see them through a different lens.

For me this is the power and the beauty and the Good News of our Christian faith.

As the Poem of Mary Oliver said ... Only if we believe that there is a deeper reality with the possibilities of God **always** at work, can we ever hope to see it.

Only if we believe that the heavenly realm is **constantly** intersecting with this earthly realm in all sorts of ways that can elevate and transfigure our human experience, can we ever hope to know it.

This after all, is the core belief of our faith. It's what the Incarnation is all about. God became human so that we could enjoy a union with God through Jesus Christ. **THIS IS MY SON LISTEN TO HIM.**

To live a life transfigured by Christ is to live in the truth recognised by EINSTEIN



"There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other as though everything is a miracle". To declare what Emily Dickinson declared ... "I dwell in Possibility"

Read all of these when you experienced the sense of the 'Divine Other' elevating and enriching your human experience. How did it open your eyes to the deeper God dimensions at work in your life? How did it change and transfigure your perception of reality? What challenges are you currently facing where you can draw strength from this truth?

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Prayer sharpens our sense of alertness. Prayer is paying attention.

Spend time now and in the coming week in prayer with no distractions to hear God's tender whisper.

2. Think of a time when you experienced the sense of the 'Divine Other' elevating and enriching your human experience.

3. How did it open your eyes to the deeper God dimensions at work in your life? How did it change and transfigure your perception of reality?

4. What challenges are you currently facing where you can draw strength from this truth?