



Glimpses of Glory
Transfiguration
6 August 2017
Revd Jenny Wilkens
Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14
2 Peter 1:16-19
Matthew 17:1-9

Recently I made a flying trip up to Nelson to spend time with my Dad. I am always in awe of how you can start off here on a day when we are under the cloud layer, take off through the clouds and murk, sometimes rocking your way up through the weather, and then suddenly break through the cloud into a whole new beautiful blue world up there. Who knew that just a few thousand metres up, you can gain a whole new perspective on the world?! It reminds me of times I've been tramping, when you've been slogging your way uphill through mist and cloud, wondering when on earth you'll ever get to the top of the hill, and then round a corner, you see the trig station, it's blowing a gale which has cleared away the cloud, and you know you've made it to the top.

I wonder if this was what it was like for Jesus' disciples, Peter, James and John, when he took them mountain climbing in Galilee, probably up Mt Hermon, which is a good 9000 feet, so not quite Aoraki/Mt Cook, more like Mt Ruapehu in the North Island, still a good trek.

Perhaps they had their heads down, focussing on putting one foot in front of the other, but all of a sudden, Jesus is no longer just beside them on the track, he is transfigured in front of them, his face shining like the sun, his clothes dazzling white. And he's not on his own, he's talking with two great figures from Israel's history: Moses to whom God gave the law to guide the people, and Elijah, one of the great prophets who called God's people back to God when they strayed.

The disciples are gob-smacked, their minds blown apart by this dazzling vision before them. Yet Peter as ever opens his mouth and comes out with the first thing he can think of: this is awesome, Jesus, what a mountain-top experience, let's freeze-frame it, capture it for all time, how about we pitch camp up here, put tents up, hold on to all this light and glory and power? Peter is obviously into events management...but he's interrupted, cut off just like that, a bright cloud overshadows them, and a voice speaks from the cloud: "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"

The disciples fall to the ground, absolutely terrified. Next thing, Jesus comes to them, touches them, Get up, don't be afraid. And now it's just the 3 of them and Jesus, by themselves again.

What are they to make of it? Had they dreamed it? What was *that* all about? They had just seen Jesus, surrounded by light and glory, supported by the great Moses and Elijah, and then heard God's voice proclaiming Jesus as God's beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased. For those with ears to hear, those were exactly the same words that Jesus had heard proclaimed over him from heaven at his baptism (Mt 3:17). But there were 3 more little words added on the end this time – *listen to him!*

God calls the disciples to listen to Jesus – why? What had he been saying? Well, Jesus was about to start on the long journey south to Jerusalem and he'd already warned his disciples that this was going to end in great suffering, that he would end up being killed and only then rise on the third day (Mt 16:21). And Peter's response to Jesus had been instant, no way, Lord, this must never happen to you! (Mt 16:22).

Now Jesus is going to keep on teaching and telling the disciples how it is going to be, that he will walk the road to Jerusalem, face rejection and opposition and suffering, that he will take everything thrown at him by the authorities, that he will absorb all that hatred and jealousy and envy until it kills him, and meet it only with the power of love. And that love poured out will be vindicated by God when Jesus is raised from the dead.

But the disciples can't get their heads round that now, all they can hear is Jesus saying that it's all downhill from here, that the one they thought would take out the Romans and proclaim himself Messiah and King, is going to end up an abject failure. While they were grappling with all this, perhaps that is why Peter, James and John were granted this vision of Jesus in glory, just a glimpse of glory, a glimpse of the risen Jesus, a prequel of the end of the story if you like, to keep them going through the tough stuff that was to follow. They are called to hold together this picture of Jesus' divine glory and sonship, with his destiny to suffer and die as a degraded human being on the cross.

I really feel some sympathy with Peter's attempts here to get control of things again, to tie things down with tent pegs, to put things into neat little boxes. But as ever our Jack-in-the-Box God jumps out of the box, cannot be contained, the mystery of God is too big for any kind of tent. And so the overshadowing cloud comes down, just as it had on Mt Sinai where God appeared to Moses and the people of Israel in a thick cloud on the mountain (Exodus 19:16). And Moses in answer to God's call took the risk of entering 'the dark cloud where God was'¹.

¹ AJ Malherbe & E Ferguson (trans.) Gregory of Nyssa: The Life of Moses. New York: Paulist Press, 1978, p.95

Peter is learning here that to follow Jesus is to be called into that place of risk, of entering the cloud where we cannot control the wild, unpredictable God, the Aslan who is not safe but is good. Perhaps that's the reason Jesus took Peter, James and John up the mountain to encounter this God we cannot domesticate, or make to fit our plans, which the wind of God simply blows away or buries in thick cloud. Rather we are called to listen and listen again – Listen to him!

I was fascinated to learn² that in the Eastern church the feast of Transfiguration is called the Feast of the Metamorphosis, just like caterpillar to butterfly! But the metamorphosis happens to the *disciples*, not to Christ.

Russian Orthodox scholar Vladimir Lossky put it this way: The Transfiguration was not a phenomenon circumscribed in time and space: Christ underwent no change at that moment, even in his human nature, but a change occurred in the awareness of the apostles, who for a time received the power to see their Master as He was, resplendent in the eternal light of His Godhead. The apostles were taken out of history and given a glimpse of eternal realities. St Gregory Palamas says... 'by a change in their senses, the Lord's disciples passed from the flesh to the Spirit'. To see the divine light with bodily sight, as the disciples saw it...we must participate in and be transformed by it, according to our capacity. Mystical experience implies this change in our nature, its transformation by grace³.

The challenge to us, as to Moses and to Peter, is dare we enter that cloud of divine presence if it might change us, reshape us, transfigure us? We stand there dazzled by the light, yet a voice calls us to enter that disorienting cloud and it is God calling to us, calling us to listen and to follow, even when we cannot see the way. Perhaps that is how it has been feeling for us as a community for nearly seven years now. But will we continue to listen for God's voice, to stand in the light, to be willing to take the risk of entering the cloud of God's presence?

The mystical 14th century English text called 'The Cloud of Unknowing' gives us some good advice: 'When you first begin, you find only darkness and as it were a cloud of unknowing. You don't know what this means except that in your will you feel a simple steadfast intention reaching out towards God...Reconcile yourself to wait in this darkness as long as is necessary, but still go on longing after God whom you love. For if you are to feel God, or to see God in this life, it must always be in this cloud, in this darkness'⁴.

Still go on longing after God whom you love, and then feel the touch of Jesus, saying 'Get up and do not be afraid'. Listen to him!

² Andrew Mayes, *Holy Land? Challenging questions from the biblical landscape*. London: SPCK, 2011, p.68

³ Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*. London: James Clarke, 1957, p.223.

⁴ C. Wolters (trans.) *The Cloud of Unknowing*. London: Penguin, 1976, pp.53-54.