

Christ Church, South Yarra
Thursday, 6 August, 2009
Transfiguration sermon by David Cole

Daniel 7.9-10, 13-14

2 Peter 1.16-19

Mark 9.2-10

The Transfiguration is mentioned in all three synoptic gospels, and is a truly remarkable event. This is the story of how Jesus, Peter, James and John went up a mountain for a time apart. Luke's version tells us that they went to pray, and that during their time of prayer, the three disciples had a vision of Jesus transfigured. The Greek word gives us 'metamorphosis', meaning to completely change or transform, such as when a tulip bulb transforms into a beautiful tulip blossom. Jesus' body was transformed from an earthly body into a heavenly body, from a human body into a resurrection body. We read that they saw his face shine like the sun, and his clothes turn a dazzlingly brilliant white. Moreover, they had a vision of two of the very greatest figures of the Hebrew Scriptures, appearing with Jesus: Moses - the great leader, lawgiver and liberator of God's people, and Elijah - the great prophet. And they saw a cloud and heard a thundering divine voice which told them in no uncertain terms that Jesus was greater than the greatest liberator, and greater than the greatest prophet: that he was indeed the Son of God.

Well, you can see why this story stands out. Even alongside stories of Jesus' ministry – his remarkable teaching and preaching and amazing healings, this is a story of high drama. It is way out of the ordinary. It is inexplicable in rational terms, yet full of symbolic meaning, imprinted on the minds of those who experienced it. On hearing this story, we are meant to *feel* the emotional response of Peter or James or John: an unforgettable, visionary revelation of the glory of God and the truth about Jesus.

Like other aspects of the Christian story, we in our time, with our scientific world-view, have trouble understanding what actually happened. We ask "*How* could it happen? What kind of physics can explain how a person's face and clothes can become dazzling white? What kind of group psychology do we need to embrace to understand how three people could all imagine the same scene and hear the same words?"

Well, I don't think that such questions matter at all. When we seek to take in an story such as the Transfiguration, which has come down to us from people who lived in another place and another time, we can't even be sure that we are asking the *right* questions. I say this because those who shared the vision of the Transfiguration, and the people who heard their story, and those who finally wrote down their story, not only lived in another time and place, but lived with an entirely different world view.

So: *is there* an overlap - a place where the ancient world-view and our world-view somehow touch - a place where we can engage with this event here and now?

Well, I think there is, and I am suggesting that it has to do not with scientific explanation, but with apprehension – what I like to think of as the aesthetic dimension of human experience – that incorporates the rational *and* the cognitive, *and* reaches beyond each, to enable us to apprehend (or take to ourselves) meaning and truth.

The symbolic dimension must have been very strong for anyone familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures: and in particular for those early Christians who heard and told the story. We have already received a clue to such significance in the Book of Daniel. In this reading we hear how Daniel has a vision of the Son of Man coming from the presence of God at the fulfillment of time. This was long recognized as an allusion to the Messiah-figure. And Jesus uses these very words ‘Son of Man’ to describe himself. If they had thought Jesus merely a charismatic, wise, spiritual healer and inspirational teacher, then – as a result of this vision - they now knew he was much more than that.

But the symbolic allusions rolled on. The disciples could not have failed to bring to mind the story of another mountain-top engagement in which Moses’ face shone in the presence of God, and God’s voice was heard in a cloud; and they would have remembered that Elijah was the one who heard God’s still, small voice in his heart. Two of the great leaders of God’s people from ancient times, with special significance for THIS event in which Jesus’ face and clothes take on a dazzling brilliance and a voice is heard from heaven. Peter, James and John understood through these symbols, much more powerfully than they ever did by hearing the message in mere words.

In this experience they learned that the Law and the Prophets support the mission of Jesus. The greatest law-giver and the greatest prophet identify themselves with him. Of course, Peter’s enthusiasm led him in the wrong direction, but his response enables all those who hear this gospel to learn that the Law and the Prophets pointed beyond themselves to Jesus. Moreover, if the glory of God had been glimpsed before in other mountain-top experiences, THIS mountain-top experience eclipsed them all, because Jesus was not just another revelation from God, another person through whom God worked. For Peter and James and John witnessed a phenomenon which they rightly recognized from the Hebrew Scriptures as the presence of God - the great luminous cloud which overshadowed them, and they heard the divine words which were unmistakable in their message: Jesus is God’s beloved Son.

We heard another significance in the first reading tonight, a testimony preserved in a letter attributed to Peter. The letter says: “when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, we were not slavishly repeating cleverly invented myths; no, we had seen his majesty with our own eyes. He was honoured and glorified by God the Father, when a voice came to him from the transcendent glory, ‘This is my beloved Son, he enjoys my favour.’ We ourselves heard this voice from heaven, when we were with him on the holy mountain.” So there it is - no attempt at scientific explanation, but instead an absolutely strong affirmation that this is not some mere invention, not one person imagining this in some drug-induced vision, not some invented story of a weak mind looking for something to believe in. “We were there. We saw it. And we apprehended its significance.”

Madeleine L'Engle says, this is "strong stuff. Mythic stuff. The stuff which makes life worth living, which lies on the other side of provable fact" (*The Mythical Bible* Program #3501, January 6, 1991). These disciples were admitted to an extraordinary privilege: in seeing Jesus' face shining like the sun, and his clothes gleaming and glistening, they saw something of the future: Jesus as he would be once he had endured suffering and crucifixion, and once he had been raised again to life.

Well, ancient people apprehended deep understanding through symbols and artistic expression, and so do we: images, events and stories, music and the visual arts, all carry with them special significance - poignancy, meaning; they somehow cut through our daily lives, through our rational thought, and engage us at a very deep level.

So what can *we* make of this story? Well, let me suggest the following:

1. We can understand that in order to really apprehend the truth that Jesus is God's Son, we need to engage more than the rational/cognitive dimension of ourselves.
2. We can move beyond fact to deep understanding through symbol - the power of God's message which comes to us through words, certainly, but also through artistic media: images, biblical story and vision, and - of course - music.

In tonight's service we have some inspiring music. Alongside Chris Willcock's superb mass setting, we have some inspiring hymns: Brian Wren's introit hymn, in which the great message of the Transfiguration is expressed through superb poetry and music: we *feel* the disciples trembling and the voice of God thundering. We have Carl Dawe's riveting gradual hymn, reminding us that, because of the Transfiguration, we shall never be the same, so let us think about what that means, and prize compassion more than riches or fame.

And we have the Dieter Rimaud / Jean Langlais offertory hymn 'God, your glory we have seen in your Son' - focusing us on God's brilliance revealed in Jesus. I think that through music, we apprehend this kind of spiritual reality in ways that supersede mere discursive argument. Or, as Madeleine L'Engle has pointed out, "the brilliance of God is indeed blinding, and we need myth, story [the arts], to help us bear the light." The great aesthetic philosopher, Susanne Langer, pointed to the special power unleashed when words and music are brought together. We can read the words, exegete the words, and even *say* the words, but when we SING the words they take on another level of meaning and speak to our human experience in a more powerful way.

Tonight, of course, we will launch a new CD of hymn accompaniments for *Together in Song*, recorded here in this church, by your very own Christ Church musicians. I am delighted that we will be doing this, because the CD will provide an important resource for congregations to KEEP SINGING THE FAITH, and to keep apprehending it in profoundly moving ways. If churches with no accompanist use this superb recording, then they will still be able to engage that musical aesthetic that will feed and nurture their spiritual understanding.

If we had been there on the mountain, our lives would have been changed forever. The mountain, the cloud, the transformation of Jesus, the appearance of great figures of the past, the dazzling brilliance, and the thundering voice. They all carry the message to us tonight as to those on the mountain so long ago:

“Jesus is God’s Son. Jesus’ message is life-changing and true. Follow him. And don’t be daunted, for at the culmination of all things, God’s will will be done, and God’s Son glorified, and the brilliance of God’s glory revealed.”

The final hymn tonight will have us singing this prayer: “All laud we would render: O help us to see, ’tis only the splendour of light hideth thee; and so let thy glory, Almighty, impart through Christ in the story, thy Christ to the heart.”

May we take this message to our hearts, and apprehend it, and let it sing in our lives this week, this year, and forever.
Amen.