

The Transfiguration of the Lord
22/2/2009

Mark the Evangelist

2 Kings 2:1 - 12

Psalm 30

2 Corinthians 4:3 - 6

Mark 9:2 - 9

Sermon preached by Rev. Duncan S Watson

When I was a student at Princeton Theological Seminary in the late 1950s in my first year I was a member of the seminary's touring choir. This choir sang mainly in churches each Sunday and toured for eight weeks in the summer vacation. Its purpose was part worship, part entertainment, and part advertising for the Christian ministry. We would sing about twelve items; there would be prayers and readings, and there would be two so-called testimonies when members of the choir in turn would give an account of why they felt called to the ordained ministry. One of these testimonies I well remember was given by Franco Giampiccoli, a member of the Waldensian Church of Italy, who was doing a master's thesis in theology.

In his talk Franco recalled the wonderful times he had enjoyed at the ecumenical youth camp called Agape, up in the mountains above the village of Ghigo in one of the beautiful Waldensian valleys in North West Italy. He recounted what the director of the centre said to the young people at the end of one conference. He had read the story of the transfiguration of Jesus and what he said went something like this. "Over the past few days you have been stimulated by study, discussions and worship, you have had great fun and enjoyed wonderful fellowship and friendship, all amidst this stunning mountain scenery. And no doubt you would wish it could go on for ever. Tomorrow, however, like Peter and the disciples in the story, you will be going down the mountain to the farms, villages, towns and cities in which you live. In most cases you will be returning to a humdrum, monotonous, frustrating, and sometimes tragic and sad life. But as with Peter and the disciples that is where you will find your calling as Christians."

In 1962 my wife, Tertia, and I visited Agape where Franco himself was now the deputy director. By then the director who had given that final talk had gone on to become the pastor of what Franco described as a village of 50, 000 people in Sicily, a village because in its poverty it lacked the facilities of a town. Many years later Franco was elected moderator of the Waldensian Church of Italy in which role he was for five years based in Rome. However, in his final ministry he too spent years as a pastor in Sicily before he retired to his native Turin. So the director and Franco practised what many years before the director preached in that end-of-conference talk on the transfiguration. They went down the mountain to the everyday and difficult world of Italy to serve their Lord.

Now, Franco's story has always shaped my view of the transfiguration. It is not a particularly profound view but I believe it is essentially right as an interpretation of the transfiguration. It tells us, as Christians, where we are and where we should be, and what we should not look for, some Churchillian "sunlit uplands". However, there are some things which may be added about this story. Obviously, it echoes the baptism of Jesus where the voice from heaven says only to Jesus, "You are my Son, the Beloved",

but now at the transfiguration, the voice from the cloud says openly to Peter, James, and John, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him." They are told who this Jesus is and whom they must follow. The transfiguration of course is also a pointer forward to the decisive and definitive event of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead when he is acknowledged as Lord. However, it would be wrong, as some early Christians evidently believed, that this was the glorious and happy ending when the crucifixion could be forgotten and the rest would be sweetness and light, and happy smiles. In fact, the events and words at the baptism and the transfiguration of Jesus are always epiphanies for a church which travels the pilgrim road of taking up the cross as it follows Jesus.

Unfortunately, the lectionary reading of the baptism is truncated so that the two verses which describe what the Spirit, who descended upon Jesus at his baptism, did with Jesus after his baptism - the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness where he was tempted by Satan. Without those two verses we have only half of what the baptism implies. Similarly, in the reading from 2 Corinthians today we are told of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ but the following verses are left out and in these we are told that we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed and so on. Today, however, the lectionary reading does take us down the mountain and tells us that the way of the resurrection is the way of the cross. Moreover, the transfiguration reading is located on this Sunday before Ash Wednesday which begins the church's remembrance of the way of Jesus to the resurrection by way of his crucifixion. There is no short cut to glory; there is nothing to suggest we should be up the mountain beyond the worries and problems of our lives and the world. That seems clear.

Yet, despite this, the church and Christians, like Peter who does not know what to say and suggests they build three dwellings, want to hold the moment of glory. They look to seeming cure-alls. And certainly *Peter* had a point. He's got a veritable who's who up there: Moses the prophet of the end-time, Elijah who it was believed would come at the dawning of the end-time, and Jesus, clothed in dazzling white, the crown of it all. And time and time again the church has done something similar. As I have been in reminiscent mood I recall an Advent sermon I heard preached by the great Reinhold Niebuhr in the Princeton University Chapel. In this sermon he went over the history of the church when, he recalled the times that the church had tried to anticipate the Kingdom of God only to have the futility of such pretensions overthrown. No doubt he would have mentioned the establishment of the church as a state religion in the fourth century, the rise of Christendom in the medieval period, and possibly the efforts of the Pilgrim Fathers to establish a new Jerusalem in New England in the seventeenth century.

I also remember a remark of the late Bishop Max Thomas when he was a chaplain to the University of Melbourne in the 1960s. He said that in his time as a priest there had already been three things suggested as panaceas for the church - stewardship, the Christian education movement, and the pastoral counselling movement based on the model of clinical psychology. These all of course had much merit. I am not so sure about the managerial models we have become wedded to and today's talk of governance - all along with eternal re-structuring. They are all too top down, drawing attention and indeed money away from the local congregations where the people of God worship, and which are the centres of the church's life. So we go on seeking the twelve steps or whatever to our renewed church and sometimes fail to go down the mountain to take steps on the way of the cross.

But it would be wrong just to employ the transfiguration story as a way to attack the self-esteem of the church and us Christians. For the transfiguration story is telling us that the way of Jesus down the mountain is not a choice between glory and darkness, or between joy and the humdrum. Rather, here in this story we are being given the promise of his light in darkness, a promise that along the way of life in the Father's house there will be many abiding places where God meets us, as Lesslie Newbigin has reminded us in his study of John's gospel. There will be what might be called little resurrections; there is amelioration. A life can improve, a community can grow in faith and be renewed. There *is* a peace beyond understanding. Yes, we know that life is not one great progress from worse to better; we also know that God's future is not necessarily the same as the future we envisage or plan but we do know that God is Lord of the future whatever may happen. We do know that God the Father of the risen Christ comes again and again in the power of the Spirit, not least in the service of word and sacrament. Indeed, I believe if something like the worship of your congregation was repeated across the face of the Uniting Church, we would not be so anxious, indeed frenetic, about the future of the church.

For me the hymns of the church have often been that point of light shining in darkness, the place where down here, as it were, the light of the transfigured Christ shines. Hear, for instance, some verses of the twelfth century hymn, "Jesus, thou joy of loving hearts", as they now appear in your hymnbook:

Lord Jesus, joy of loving hearts,
true fount of life, our lives sustain,
from any bliss that earth imparts
We turn unfilled to you again.

We taste you, Lord, the living bread,
and long to feast upon you still,
we drink of you, the fountainhead,
and thirst our souls from you to fill.

For ever, Jesus, with us stay,
make all our moments calm and bright,
chase the dark night of sin away,
shed on this world your holy light.

The piety of that hymn tells of the transfigured and risen Christ present in the midst of my life, this life, your life, the world's life. And the reading today adds one more thing, the voice from heaven: "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him". In success and failure, in prosperity and tragedy - as in these terrible bushfire days - that is the message of the church. We do not know it all, we do not possess all truth, we certainly have not arrived but we know the Lord who holds the present, past, and future in his hands, Jesus Christ the risen, crucified Lord. The story today concludes with "only Jesus" observable. As a commentator has remarked "Jesus is all that is given to the church." And if that is so, it is Jesus clothed in his gospel whom we must proclaim to the world, or as his people we have nothing to proclaim. Moreover, as we proclaim or speak it is his way of compassion, reconciliation, and community that you and I are called to follow.