

Transfiguration
6/03/2011

Mark the Evangelist

Exodus 24:12 - 18

Psalm 99

2 Peter 1:16 - 21

Matthew 17:1 - 9

A lamp shining in a dark place: speaking of God's majesty in a time of darkness

As the scenes of devastated Christ Church haunted our television screens and the death toll rose it was hard to avoid thinking about the many who died instantly in the quake, but others met their end more slowly, hidden in some dark place. To wait through the darkness with uncertain hope of life would be the worst kind of end. To be able to wait with the comfort of a lamp would be very different even if the end still came. A lamp speaks of hope as opposed to despair, life as opposed to death. Among the Berbers a lamp is lit every time a child is born. A lamp is also carried before a bride on her wedding, and burns through the night to summon God. In our tradition God is light in whom there is no darkness, and the lamp is a sign of the divine presence, a saving, transforming light.

Peter speaks of a lamp shining in a dark place until: *the day dawns and the morning star rises in our hearts*. He is speaking of being comforted in a situation of adversity until another reality breaks into our life. "The morning star that rises in our hearts" is a metaphor based on the planet Venus, the first star to rise that shines through the night and is the last to go out as the Sun rises and the new day dawns. This is an eschatological image that links the death and resurrection of Jesus with God's promise of the fulfilment of all things. The lamp is the knowledge of God-with-us as light in the transforming power of a life that conquers death. Because of Easter Day and Jesus' words "I am with you to the close of the age" we are travelling with hope towards a new future in which the fullness of Christ's gifts will be made clear for all.

There are many kinds of darkness. For Peter the darkness represented the world as it is, and it was related to a congregation that was turning away from Christ to experiment with alternative plausibility structures. We know about darkness. We see it as we watch events unfold in Libya. We know it too when we read and hear of senseless deaths in our own community: gangland shootings, horrendous car crashes youth suicides.

There are many kinds of lamps but the one Peter is talking about emerged in the experience he and the others had on the holy mount of Transfiguration. It is like a quote with a complex footnote that refers to the Transfiguration, a story laden with imagery reaching back to ancient times. Like Moses and Elijah before them, Jesus and Peter James and John became eyewitnesses to the majesty of God, here conceived as light, which was so bright it hid the reality it exposed. The Greeks had a way of expressing it. They said you could not see the essence of God, but you could encounter the energy of God. On the mountain Jesus' role and authority was confirmed in words spoken at his Baptism: *this is my Son, my beloved with whom I am well pleased*. Epiphany began and ends with these words, which here take place in context of Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ, and Jesus' prediction of his

death and resurrection. The repetition here of the words given at Jesus' Baptism demonstrates that Jesus has been claimed by God and that God is with us in the life and death of one of us. When the congregation to which Peter wrote was playing around with the faith he reminded them of this encounter on the holy mountain. The lamp that shines for us in a dark place, he said, is the life in which the unconquerable power of God shines forth to conquer death.

In ancient story the full significance of the Transfiguration could only be stated symbolically because theologically it has always been understood that God is wholly other - too radiant, too dazzling, too awe-full and too deeply mysterious to be fully comprehended.

A couple of years ago I rang my Internet provider to update my credit card details. When I stated the reason for my call the person responded: "Awesome". Thereafter my credit card number was "Awesome". The expiry date was "Awesome"! When I gave my name it - was "Awesome"! If I had the wit I should have said: "I am not awesome, but the One I work for is!!"

As the meaning and value of language changes and disintegrates around us it is more difficult for us to convey the message of the faith that gives us life and hope. Faith involves living with paradox. An immeasurable distance that separates frail mortals from the divine splendour, which must not be approached lightly or carelessly. And yet Peter was a witness to the dazzling radiance of God that, in the ministry of Jesus, came to inhabit the process of history. Last week in the UFT commencement lecture Chris Mostert (Quoting David Bentley Hart) put it this way: "Only the fully transcendent God can be capable of dwelling in our hearts. The Eternal comes into our time, but time cannot affect the Eternal."

Peter saw that a world without hope was a place of darkness, and he reasserted the knowledge that it was the transcendent God's choice to become available to us as the power of unconquerable love. To a straying flock he counselled: "you would do well to continue to focus on the message from the mountain". Memory is the antidote to going astray. That is why worship is fundamental to Mission. What we do here week-by-week in story, word and song is wrestle with God and struggle to find what language we can borrow to speak of these unutterable things.

Our materialistic, technological culture has a limited approach to life and language. The focus is on what is instrumental rather than deeper more subtle things like sacredness and beauty. In such a context there is a place for the Church to demonstrate by its very being that there is more to life, and that this more corresponds to the deepest longings of our hearts.

Our worship will have succeeded and will empower us for mission if people catch a fresh glimpse of God's saving, transforming light. It will have succeeded if people go home or to their work place with a fresh vision of heaven to give them strength. The beauty of holiness is a transforming power. It gives hope for the world, makes sense of suffering and joy, reinforces our relationships of love and self-giving, and is uplifting and ennobling of life.

Epiphany, the season of light has concluded on the mount of Transfiguration. Our liturgical journey now takes us down the mountain like Peter, James and John, to encounter temptation and travel with Jesus on his fatal journey to Jerusalem.

While our journey down the mountain may be one from light into a gathering darkness, it is not a journey without hope for we have been given a lamp to carry with us that shines with unconquerable light. The gift of the mountain has been to allow us to catch a glimpse of the light that will stay with us through the night and be there as the new day dawns to lead us all to fullness of life. This is an amazing message to carry in our hearts as the earthquakes and the structures of humanity collapse upon us. And for those who lie in dark places waiting for the end, and those who have forsaken everything to flee the horrors of a regime gone berserk, this is not extra luggage: it may actually be something that has the power to carry and sustain them with hope amid the terror and loss.
