

Sunday 11th February 2018 Cathedral, Grahamstown 7.30 & 9.30 a.m.		Transfiguration Sunday
2 Kings 2:1-12	Ps 50:1-6	2 Cor 4:3-6
		Mark 9:2-9
CLIMBING THE MOUNTAIN		

“Six days later Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And in their presence he was transfigured...” (Mk 9:2)

1. Mountaintop experience...

Mt Everest is the highest mountain in the world, at 8,848 metres above sea-level. For years, it has been the target of the most ambitious climbers. Finally, in 1953, the first two climbers reached the top: Tenzing Norgay and Edmund Hillary. Since then, they have been followed by thousands of others. Nearly 300 people have died in their attempt. But people continue to climb that mountain.

Why the attraction of danger and physical endurance? Why this urge to climb trees (when we are younger) and climb mountains?

George Mallory, who was later to die while climbing, was asked why he was climbing Mt Everest. He replied, “Because it’s there!”

Bear Gryllis, a climber and adventurer, said, “I loved climbing because of the freedom, and having time and space.”

Edmund Hillary: “It is not the mountain that we conquer, but ourselves.”

John Muir: “Keep close to Nature's heart... and break clear away, once in awhile, and climb a mountain or spend a week in the woods.

Wash your spirit clean.”¹

“Climbing to the top demands strength, whether it is to the top of Mt Everest or the top of your career.” APJ Abdul Kalam

Today’s Gospel reading of the transfiguration takes us up the mountain, away from the ordinary, the mundane, the everyday, to another level. To a sacred space, a sacred moment. We walk with Jesus and the three disciples to the place of the transfiguration. We see Moses and Elijah speaking with Jesus. We are overcome with awe and wonder and fear. And we hear the voice of the Father, speaking to us: “This is my beloved Son; listen to him.” (Mk 2:7) A mountain-top experience.

What do we mean when we talk about a mountain-top experience? Climbing mountains is often used as a symbol or metaphor for the journey: the search for truth, the longing for wonder and mystery. A challenge to be faced and overcome. It is an encounter with wonder and glory and mystery. An experience of supreme delight and joy. A moment of triumph and success. Winning a race. Scoring a try or a goal in a big game. Watching our favourite team win the match. Finally graduating with that degree that has consumed our lives. Perhaps the birth of a child. A moment or an experience of radiance, tranquillity, peace. Touching the holy. Catching a glimpse of glory. A divine encounter.

John Gillespie Magee was a World War Two fighter pilot. He wrote a poem about flying, called *High Flight*. The poem begins

Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of earth,
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings...

and ends

And, while with silent lifting mind I’ve trod
The high untrespassed sanctity of space,

¹ <https://www.brainyquote.com/topics/mountain>

Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.²

Touching the face of God. Being in the presence of glory beyond words. Transfiguration.

2. Transfiguration...

“Transfiguration” is a big word. It means

“a complete change of form or appearance into a more beautiful or spiritual state.”

This Sunday of the Transfiguration comes at the end of the season of the Epiphany.

Epiphany means revelation. An epiphany is a moment of sudden insight or understanding. An “aha” moment when we see the bigger picture, when we finally understand! The Epiphany in our Christian calendar, 6th January, is the explosion of God’s love and truth into the world through the birth of Jesus Christ. We began the season of the Epiphany with the visit of the Magi – the wise men – as they came to worship the new born Christ child. We began with this encounter with light and glory and wonder revealed to the world.

Now we end the season of Epiphany with another “aha” moment, another encounter with light and glory and wonder. The transfiguration of Christ.

Transfiguration Sunday is also the Sunday before Lent. Ash Wednesday is this week. We move from the mountaintop into the wilderness with Jesus, the wilderness of desolation, the wilderness of temptation and testing. The vision of Christ in glory is given to us to carry us through the tough times of despair and emptiness.

2 Kings 2:1-12:

² <http://www.davidpbrown.co.uk/poetry/john-magee.html>

The ascension of Elijah, taken up in a chariot and with horses of fire into heaven. For Elisha, who saw this, it was an encounter with the glory of God, and it was also his commissioning to take up the mantle of Elijah, the task and role and calling of the prophet.

Psalm 50:3

“Our God shall come, and shall not keep silence: there shall go before him a consuming fire, and a mighty tempest shall be stirred up round about him.” (SAPB)

“Our God is coming, he will not keep silent: before him is devouring fire and tempest whirls about him.” (AAPB)

Our Gospel reading (Mark 9:2-9)

Six days later – six days after the cross is foreshadowed; after Peter’s confession of faith at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus’s first prediction of his death, Peter’s shock and his rebuke from Jesus; and the solemn words of the Lord: “Anyone who wants to be a follower of mine must deny self, take up his cross and follow me”

Six days after this great change and pronouncement. The transfiguration is followed by – is bracketed by - hard times, ministry, facing evil, the boy possessed, struggle, difficulty, conflict, the everyday and ordinary and mundane, potholes and drought.

Peter, James and John are the inner circle of the disciples. Those who would later carry the faith and the reality of this experience.

The high mountain – Sinai, Horeb, the place of worship, the place of encounter...

Jesus is transfigured, his clothes become dazzling white (in Matthew 17:2, his face shines like the sun) It is a foretaste of the resurrection, Christ in glory, the Father reveals his Son as the Christ.

On the mountain, the transfigured Christ is joined by Moses – representing the Law; and by Elijah – representing the prophets.

They are his companions. They point to him in his glory. They affirm him as the Messiah, the anointed one, the one sent by God to fulfil and complete the Law and the Prophets.

Peter's uncertain response:

“It is good that we are here... shall we make shelters for each of you?”

The cloud of glory, the shadow of darkness, the voice of the Father...

The voice of the Father speaks to those present, and to us all:

“This is my beloved Son; listen to him.” (9:7)

3.And so...

In Jesus the full glory of God is revealed and encountered.

“He is the radiance of God's glory, the stamp of God's very being, and he sustains the universe by his word of power.” (Heb 1:3a)

Jesus invites us to climb the mountain with him, to this sacred moment of encounter.

It is an invitation to worship and adore. An invitation to love, to savour being in God's presence...

Invitation to discover prayer, in the messiness of everyday life.

People sometimes say, “I am not religious, I am spiritual...” but to be truly religious, to be truly spiritual, is to find our centre in God.

Brother Lawrence wrote of “the practice of the presence of God”.

Richard Rohr: “Prayer is not primarily saying words or thinking thoughts. It is, rather, a stance [or attitude of the heart, always open, always listening.] It's a way of living *in* the Presence [of God],

living in *awareness* of the Presence, and ... enjoying the Presence of God.”

Savouring, trusting, delighting in God.

We are invited to climb the mountain not because it feels good, but for our own survival. We need to climb the mountain if we are to survive. We need this encounter with God, with wonder, with beauty, with truth, with goodness.

“If you do not have [love] God and have [love] him deeply, you will turn to other loves.” John Elderedge

The Transfiguration is also in unexpected moments: those glimpses and encounters of wonder and glory in the midst of struggle and hardship, e.g. Masicule, *Breaking the Silence* in the sacred space of the cathedral...

The Transfiguration is an invitation to excel: to believe in our own potential (Nicci Hayes), to climb the mountain.

The Transfiguration says something of the nature of our experience of God...

We encounter Jesus in radiant light, and also in deepest darkness: in the glory of wonder, and in the shadow of the cloud.

The Transfiguration points backwards, to the baptism of Jesus, when the voice of the Father first spoke:

“You are my beloved Son; in you I take delight.” (1:11)

Jesus is wonderfully held in the Father’s love, affirmed, blessed, commissioned, as are you and I at our baptism, at our Confirmation, at every Eucharist, fed and strengthened with the body and blood of Christ.

The Transfiguration points forward, to another central event in the Gospel story. On the mountain of the Transfiguration, with only a few onlookers, in secret, we see an exalted, glorified Jesus; his garments are shining like light; standing on either side of him are two religious giants from the past. All is light.

But in time to come, in daylight, in public, we shall see a humiliated Jesus (Mk 15:24), whose clothes have been taken from him and divided; he will be lifted not onto a throne but onto a cross; on either side of him will not be two religious giants, but two criminals (Mk 15:27, 32). All will be darkness.

On both occasions Jesus is confessed as the Son of God – by the Father (Mk 9:7) and by the centurion (Mk 15:39).

There is the contrast of light and darkness: the brightness of the transfiguration on the mountaintop, (Mk 9:7); and the darkness over the whole land at the crucifixion (15:33).

As the Son of God, Jesus shares in the whole range of human experience and possibilities: from glory and wonder and exaltation, to suffering and humiliation, terror and death. “He is humiliated and exalted, [he is] surrounded by saints and ringed by sinners, [he is] clothed with light and wrapped in a mantle of darkness.”³

CONCLUSION

In due course, we shall climb down the mountain – as we must – back to the everyday world. But we shall take something of the majesty and wonder and mystery of the transfiguration with us. And to our surprise, when we come to Calvary, to the place of suffering and betrayal, the place of the cross, we shall find Christ there also – in the place of our sufferings, and struggles, in the place of our desolation and our darkness. Jesus is there also.

³ *The Oxford Bible Commentary* 2001, 2007: 866

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