

Sunday 6 August 2006: The Transfiguration of our Lord

The Transfiguration

Readings: 2 Peter 1. 16-19, Luke 9. 28-36

Bill Bryson in his book *Notes from a Small Island* says there are two kinds of walking in Britain, namely the everyday kind that gets you to the pub and back home again and the more earnest kind that involves stout boots, ordinance survey maps in plastic pouches, rucksacks and flasks of tea and facing up to every kind of weather. Bryson describes what he considers one of the British favourite past times when he is invited for “an amble” up a hill with some of his English friends:

Well of course it was anything but an amble. We clambered for hours up vast perpendicular slopes, round towering citadels of rock and emerged at length into a cold bleak lofty nether world, so remote that even the sheep looked startled to see us. My friends toyed with my will to live - the instant I caught up with them they would bound off refreshed with even more manly strides and I had to stumble after and never got a rest. I gasped and ached and spluttered and realised I had never done anything remotely this unnatural and vowed never to attempt such folly again. And then just as I was about to lie down and call for a stretcher, we crested a final rise and found ourselves abruptly, magically, on top of the earth, on a platform in the sky, amid an ocean of swelling summits. I had never seen anything so beautiful before... “Jesus Christ!” I said, and realised I was hooked on climbing mountains.

I know what Bryson means, I am sure many of you do. There is something incredibly memorable about climbing a mountain, even a small one. I’m not a mountaineer, not even a rambler, yet I think I could plot my life around mountains or hills I’ve climbed - you never forget them. Perhaps it’s the extreme exertion; the feeling it’s foolish to expend this much energy on anything, but nevertheless you are not going to turn back. Perhaps it’s the slight lightness of head as your heart pounds and your lungs gasp. Perhaps it’s that terrific sense of purpose in the midst of purposelessness - what is the point of climbing it anyway? And yet if you do get to the top it suddenly becomes one of life’s great achievements. The moment of making it makes you instantly forget the struggle or at least transforms the struggle into pure glow. Your limbs and joints are numb and you lie down flat looking up at the sky, and feel like a plane which has come through the rain clouds, so light you feel you will levitate. It is one of those delicious moments of peace until you remind yourself you’ve got to go down again. You can’t stay on the top of a mountain forever! After the high point you’ve got to return.

Of course throughout scripture these mountains, these high places become the meeting places with God or the gods and the journey both up and down the mountain are vivid pictures of our human pilgrimage to find God both up there in transcendence and down here among us in the darkness of the valley.

In today’s Gospel, Peter James and John get to climb the mountain. They are part of the original twelve Jesus selected to become his disciples and now they are selected again to become the inner circle who will climb the Mountain of Transfiguration with Jesus and witness a revelation that they will never forget.

They climb the mountain holding the memory of all they have witnessed thus far since they chose to leave everything behind to follow this man. They have seen *so* much. They have watched this man heal the sick - he actually cured a paralytic, the man got up and walked

away. He has opened the eyes of the blind; he has cleansed lepers, cast out evil spirits, he has seemed to be able to take sins away and renew lives in a remarkable way: he has transformed lives. He has calmed storms, walked on water (so they say) and his preaching has kept people riveted. He seems to turn things upside down and re-orientate life and lives creating a new sense of justice and order. Jesus is a man who sets others free to do the kinds of things and be the kinds of people they never believed possible. It's like the barriers that limited them and kept them confined have been broken down and on the top of the mountain they can see for miles.

It's been a struggle following this Jesus but up to this point it has seemed on the whole a joyful one, at least they have felt that they are on the winning side. Jesus is certainly no ordinary man; he is more than a prophet; more than Elijah and then at Caesarea Philippi Jesus has confronted them:

“Who do you say that I am?”

And like a bolt of lightening from above Peter has seemed to grasp it:

“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God”

Peter has opened up an understanding that had been forming in all of them and yet had never been fully understood - never fully articulated. And now as if to confirm that insight Jesus has led the three of them - Peter, James and John - up this mountain to the place of revelation.

And there suddenly, unbelievably they have seen this carpenter's son, this homeless preacher, this local healer and self made prophet, in a new and astonishing *light*. He is right up there, with Moses and Elijah; still more than that he is even greater than them. For they see Jesus in dazzling white at the very centre of the revelation and Moses and Elijah are talking to him. It is the confirmation of all that has been intimated. And these three disciples, understandably, want to hold onto that experience, possess it, sustain it forever, perpetuate the moment so that they have lasting proof. And Peter cries out: "Master it is so good to be here, let us make three dwellings, three tents, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." And as if all this is not enough there is a voice coming from the cloud telling them that Jesus is God's Son, the beloved, the chosen one, and they must listen to him. It is the mid point of the Gospels, the high point, it is a long way down from here. Perhaps although we do not reach such spiritual highs all of us have at rare moments sensed the glory of our transcendent God and what seemed a half formed hope, or longing or impossible idealistic dream or vision was suddenly there, present, real and graspable. And God for that moment was not a mirage but real and present to us.

But of course you cannot sustain those moments of religious experience. Some churches think they can but the party wears a bit thin after a while... There are times when we seem to reach the top of the mountains of our faith but often its not for long, we have to come down again just like those three disciples did.

Jack Kornfield, the Buddhist Writer, calls his book on meditation: *After the Ecstasy the Laundry*. “Most spiritual accounts end with illumination or enlightenment,” he writes “But what happens after that? What happens when the Zen master returns home to wife and children? What happens when the Christian mystic goes shopping? What is life like after the ecstasy? How do we live our understanding with a full heart?” It's true, after any religious experience you can still have the washing up to do and the rubbish to dispose of, there are still nappies to change and Mother's and friends who fail to respond to all our new found holiness. The ordinary continues, the habitual, and the routine. But our Gospel does not end with the Transfiguration. You could forgive the three disciples for thinking things would never be the

same again and wanting to hold onto the moment. They were right things would never be the same again; if they knew how bad they were going to get they never would have left that spot. Yet there was no other way. Something had been disclosed to them which could never be undisclosed. The revelation had widened the horizons of their lives and that was both wonderful and terrifying. Terrifying because it sometimes feels safer to go through life blinkered, it gives you an excuse for not doing anything. How can you live comfortably with all that Christ has demanded of us? Something is at risk, something great is at stake and that is all part of the calling.

And this is the mysterious nature of our faith. Faith is always drawing us onwards, drawing us further. Just when we thought we knew the answers, we have to set those answers down and move on empty handed. Just when the disciples thought they had reached the mountain of glory, they had to go down and start all over again - they did not ever grasp that they would have to lose all to gain all. This is the God who calls us to let go again and again as we move forward in trust. Our faith, our experiences of God has got to be lived out not only on the tops of mountains but in the cold reality of the valley among people who do not believe us and resent our religious experiences.

Yet the moments of God's transfiguration are not wasted. St Ignatius called these moments of grace "consolation." And he believed we should store up the memories of these moments to re-member them in times of desolation: like grain stored up in times of plenty to sustain us during the time of famine.

When I visited Israel in 2001, I climbed Mount Tabor which they told us was one of the proposed sites for the Transfiguration. We climbed the steep mount in the very early morning, sharp zigzag bends leading us up through an archway to a beautiful Church on top with a peacock stain glass window as a symbol of transfiguration. Early morning... sunlight dazzling I escaped from the rest of the group, seeking my moment of transfiguration, I found a narrow pathway curling down into a field of red poppies among trees. And there discovered concealed in the grass on the mount of transfiguration piles of litter, plastic bottles and wrappers, the discarded rubbish of years of tourism: transfiguration side by side with the pollution of our world; God's glory side beside with human mess. Some people said they did not like the Holy Land; it broke the vision, the mental picture they had always had of these Holy places. To me it was the opposite. I loved these places more, they were more real, more sweated and struggled over, two thousand years on and the same struggles Christ faced continuing. Perhaps that should make you want to give up, it gave me empathy the knowledge that we faced the mess together.

You see ultimately the transfiguration is not just about reaching the tops of mountains it's about the transfiguration of all of our lives and that includes the concealed rubbish too. Christ will be revealed in glory on the mountain but also he will be revealed in glory in the loneliness, forsakenness and agony of a cross. And he will transfigure that cross too - from a sign of death into a sign of life and hope. Yes he will be present at the top of mountains but also in the darkest valleys. And we must "listen to him" wherever we are.