

Transfiguration Sunday, February 3, 2008: Wesley 9.00 & 10.30 am Rev Peter Walker

Exodus 24: 12-18 & Matthew 17: 1-9

It is an unusual story this one, rich and wonderful in its mystery and wonder; this story of Jesus' Transfiguration. In this glorious moment on the mountain, the veil is pulled away and we experience who Jesus is as the divine Son; the same Son who was announced at his baptism when we began this season of epiphany soon after Christmas. Here, Jesus shines through as the very son of God.

Matthew follows closely Mark's telling of the story (Mk 9. 2-8). But whereas Mark says that only Simon Peter feels fear when he sees three figures appear, Matthew says that all three of the disciples were afraid upon hearing the voice of God from the cloud: "This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him." (17.5-6). As if in response to the fear of the disciples, Jesus himself at last speaks. Up to this point he has been silent - even passive. Now he tells his followers to get up, and not to be afraid. (17.7) Whereas throughout most of the Gospel people come to Jesus, here 'Jesus comes to them'.

This time around, with the story of the Transfiguration, the things that impress upon us are the fear and then Jesus' loving ministry toward his follower's fear. Upon seeing who Jesus is, and presumably where he is headed, his disciples feel fear. Yet he comes to them - reaches out to them and reassures them. Seen in this way, this strange story is actually a realistic picture of the heart of the Christian life.

Looking through the New Testament you will find that the predominant emotion is not joy or excitement. The main emotion of the Gospels is fear. And the people most reported on as feeling this fear were the disciples.

When Jesus assists his disciples after a night of fishing failure, and they bring in a miraculous catch, they feel fear. When Jesus calms the wind and the waves and saves the disciples in the boat, they feel fear. When the women come out of the tomb on the first Easter morning and find the tomb is empty, they feel fear. When people encountered Jesus, the first emotion was not joy, but fear. Time and again, Jesus has to say to his disciples. "Don't be afraid".

You would think that, at last, here and now, we have come upon an aspect of biblical faith to which we can easily relate; for we are all people of fear. And in many ways we live in a time of great fear.

I see the news and sit with my children while reports of terrible events come in, and I feel fear. I was in North America at the time of the September 11 events, and I remember that I saw great fear. I wonder if my life has meaning - wonder if my faith is going to send an echo back to me one day from beyond, and I feel the fear of 'what if it does not?'. I know I will die one day, and I feel fear.

One poet has called this "The age of anxiety". I don't know how Heath Ledger died but I do recall hearing that he had 5 or 6 different prescription medicines for anxiety. You can be a movie star or someone much more ordinary like us, and still need to cope with the fear of life.

It is a fearful world, but this shouldn't confuse us as to what the Bible means when it speaks of fear in the sight of God.

The sort of fear that biblical writers tell of God the presence engendering in humankind is not the sort we might (understandably) equate it with.

This is not being afraid of some ominous force that comes upon us, but rather fear that is

awe, and reverence, and holy wonder before the realisation that ,in Jesus, we are standing before God.

That is what is happening for Peter and James and John on the mountain. It is the awe-filled fear of realizing we are somehow encountering God. That fear in which we realize that God is God, and we are not. Our lives are not our own. who we think we are and whose we think we are, are changed in the most profound of ways. We understand that encounter which the writer of Psalm 139 was trying to express in these words: "I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made." (139. 14).

Another of the saints, in the letter to the Hebrews, said: "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." (10.31)

False gods - those other things we mistakenly worship - offer no fear. They have none of this awe and reverence and wonder. But our God is the living awe-inspiring God, and to see or feel, or somehow to be set upon by that loving presence, as the disciples did on the mountain, and to know that Jesus was on a perilous journey - which they did, for he had told them only moments before that he was to die - is to feel the awe, reverence, and holy wonder, that the Bible means to say when it speaks of fear in the presence of God.

A person came to see me about some things that had been happening in their life which led them to feel that, maybe, they ought to be thinking about going into the ministry. I listened to what they had to tell me about those experiences, and I said, "This sounds suspiciously like the work of God. I believe you are hearing the voice of God in these signs in your life." "I was afraid that you would say that", came the reply. Holy fear.

Encounters with the living God can be deeply moving, deeply fearful - and deeply transforming. On the mountain top, Jesus doesn't simply reveal himself to his followers, he also called them to follow him. In Matthew's account, it is only four or five verses beforehand that Jesus issues this statement: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." (Mt 16. 24-25)

We are called to walk the path that he will walk. I am scared by that. But I also hear Jesus words "Do not be afraid" in the same that we are told he spoke them to Peter and James and John who, Matthew writes, "fell to the ground and were overcome by fear", and Jesus said - "get up and do not be afraid." (17. 6-7).

We do fear some things in life, but your faith leaves you with nothing to fear. "Get up and do not be afraid."

One portion of this Transfiguration experience has the voice of God being heard by Jesus' followers, telling them, "This is my Son...listen to him." (17.5). In this 'age of anxiety' we may choose to listen to our fears. In fact, it is impossible not to, at times - perhaps many times. But I hope you will also choose to listen to him; to him who has reassured you, told you to rise and follow him, and promised to be with you every step of the way, no matter what the journey holds. Amen.

[I am grateful to Rev Dr William Willimon for the key themes of this sermon]