

Transfiguration Sunday – 14 February 2010 – Rev David Thiem

Theme: Encountering God

Reading: Luke 9: 28-36 & Exodus 34: 29-35

Introduction

Marcus Borg begins his book 'The Heart of Christianity' with the words:

“There are no serious intellectual obstacles to being a Christian. There is a way of seeing Christianity that makes persuasive and compelling sense of life.”

I agree with Borg..... yet you get some amazing accounts that you struggle with in Scripture and which can't easily be explained except through faith!

Certainly the Transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain is a very strange and mysterious story. It is a faith story – an encounter with God.

This Epiphany account is the bridge to the next phase of the Christian year with Ash Wednesday this coming week marking the beginning of Lent. Appropriately in the Transfiguration we read of Jesus turning towards Jerusalem in ministry terms.

In our Old Testament lesson we heard of Moses going up the mountain, there God reveals God's way to him for the people of Israel. The distant God comes close and speaks. At last the veil is lifted and there is straight, direct conversation.

The Exodus passage is a natural 'lead in' for today's Gospel. Jesus takes three of his disciples up a high mountain, as if to bring them closer to God. There they experience Jesus, Moses and Elijah conversing. Then they hear the voice out of the clouds saying "This is my Son, listen to him". The disciples are moved from wonderment and enjoyment to awe and fear.

Is this story of the Transfiguration a kind of parable for sometimes how it is in the church's worship? We meet, we converse with God, we listen and sometimes by the grace of God there is a voice or a new revelation. The living God speaks, reveals, intrudes and interrupts into our lives.

As mentioned earlier, I enjoy Marcus Borg's writing but not everything in our Christian faith needs to be rationalised away. Rather there are experiences that occur which are mystical, unexplained events, healing, guidance and these are part of our faith. Aspects of the Transfiguration certainly are unexplained mysteries.

Middle

Let us look a little more closely at the Transfiguration.

This event in Jesus' life is attested to in all three Synoptic Gospels:

- Matthew 17:1-8
- Mark 9:2-8
- Luke 9:28-36

In all three accounts, the disciples Peter, James and John accompany Jesus to the top of the mountain and witness this event.

The Greek word 'metamorphomai' is used of the mountain top experience. Literally translated it means 'to undergo a metamorphosis or a transformation.' Hence the sharing with the children the remarkable transformations that occurs for a caterpillar to metamorphose into a butterfly through the pupae cocoon stage.

This is what happens to Jesus on the mountain – no he doesn't become a butterfly but his ministry is directed, changed to focus on Jerusalem and the arrest, trial, Crucifixion, death and resurrection that he will go through.

In the immediate however, Jesus' clothes became intensely brilliant white (glowing in a sense like Moses' face in Ex 34) and the prophets Elijah and Moses are seen by the disciples conversing with him. How the disciples knew that it was Moses and Elijah I have no idea! Details of the account vary slightly in the Gospels, but one of the purposes of each Gospel writer is to link Jesus with the major personalities and prophets from the Hebrew Scriptures. Not only did Moses and Elijah suffer as great prophets and lawgivers, but each had a vision of the glory of God on a mountain. Moses on Mt Sinai and Elijah on Mt Horeb.

Jesus' transfiguration was probably on Mt Hermon, which is just north of Caesarea Philippi and fits in with the area that Jesus was ministering at that time. In the Transfiguration a cloud moves in and the disciples lose sight of Jesus, Moses and Elijah. It is out of this cloud that a voice is audibly heard to say "This is my favoured son, listen to him". As the disciples look around they see no-one except Jesus. Commentators suggest that this moment is to re-inforce Jesus' relationship with God as being much closer than the OT law-maker, Moses, and the greatest of the prophets, Elijah. There are strong links to Moses, hence our Exodus passage in the Lectionary.

These links include:

- 3 men accompanied Moses up Mt Sinai (Ex 24:1)
Of course Jesus had three of his disciples with him.
cloud covered the mountain top and God called out of the cloud. (Ex 24:1)
- Moses face was shining from his encounter with God
(Ex 34:29). Jesus shone during the Transfiguration
- Peter's desire to set up booths (tents) has parallels back to Moses where a booth was placed over the tabernacle (Ex 26:7-14).

In a real sense Jesus is here seen bringing in the 'new covenant' with God – easy access, no other intermediary.

Also Jesus' mission is re-inforced. It is from this moment that Jesus turns his heart and mind towards Jerusalem and all that will entail.

Now into Lent we go.

Conclusion

But what does all this mean for us today?

I believe it makes us think about 'encountering our God' and how we feel close to God. How does this happen? Where do we feel closest to God? How do we make space in our lives and our worship that enables us to encounter God? How do we actually feel the presence of God?

All very important questions for us to reflect upon.

In one of the home groups that I shared with during the week there were differing experiences of where and when people had felt 'close to God'. For many it was through creation – climbing mountains, being by the ocean, enjoying a wonderful garden. For others it was through art and music. Yet for another it was in and through a faith community experience. We are all different and that is part of the wonder and awe of our Christian faith that God is encountered in so many different ways and places.

In the National Christian Life Survey conducted in the parish in the latter part of last year both Wesley worship groups, as a whole, said that 'in our worship a sense of the presence of God' had declined over the past few years. Possibly this is something for us to think about – 'how do we enable our worship to be a time where we not only praise our God but possibly encounter our God?'

As we come to the time of Lent, those 40 days of preparation for the Easter events, may we ponder allowing God room to encounter us as we pray, reflect, share faith experiences and think about the awesomeness of our God.

The Transfiguration – encountering God – leaves us with many questions but it also calls us to seek the ‘presence of God’ in our own lives and what transformation that may bring for us individually as well as the people of God in this place.

Amen