

“Transfiguration, again!”

Rev Gregor Henderson, Wesley Uniting Church, Canberra

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2 Kings 2:1-12 Mark 9:2-10

Every year we read the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus on the Sunday before the commencement of Lent. So every year we preachers have to find something to say, hopefully something new and different and insightful, on an event which we most of us know all too well.

I reckon I've preached on just about every theme which can be found in the Transfiguration:

- on how the Transfiguration confirms who Jesus is, God's Son;
- on how it presents Jesus as the fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets, represented by Moses and Elijah;
- on the important spiritual refreshment which comes from mountain-top experiences;
- on Peter's wanting to preserve the moment, by wanting to build three dwellings so Moses, Elijah and Jesus can stay longer;
- on God's word of love for Jesus and the instruction for the disciples to listen to Jesus.

So what's left? Is there anything else, is there any more learning we can shake out of the Transfiguration, to assist our understanding, feed our faith and help our living?

Well, after a fair bit of pondering and prayer, I've come up with four more pieces of understanding and learning for us, from the event of the Transfiguration.

The first is Elijah. Why is it Elijah who appears from heaven to chat with Jesus? Moses is more obvious, he's the father of the Jewish faith, the key figure in the Hebrew Scriptures, the one through whom God brings in the covenant with the people of Israel and gives them the all-important Law.

The fact is that Elijah - seen as the most important, the most effective of the prophets, those who constantly called the people of Israel back to God, and who was regarded as never having died for he was translated directly into heaven on a chariot of fire - Elijah was always associated with the future decisive action of God. Like Moses, Elijah had had a crucial mountaintop experience, on Mt Carmel, with that terrible competition with the priests of the false god Baal. In the very last verses of the Old Testament, in the book of Malachi, we read "Lo, I will send the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse". In the gospels, when Jesus asks his disciples who they think he is - an episode which comes just six days before the Transfiguration, the disciples answer "Some say you're John the Baptist, others Elijah". And a few verses after the Transfiguration, as they come down the mountain, Jesus tells the disciples that Elijah has indeed already come, implying that John the Baptist is to be regarded as Elijah. When Jesus is dying on the cross and calls out with a sense of abandonment "Eloi, Eloi" which means "My God, my God", we are told some of the bystanders said "listen, he is calling out for Elijah". Elijah is expected, welcomed as one who accompanies God's most significant in-breaking into the life of the world. So Elijah's presence with Jesus says heaps about the importance of what God was doing through the ministry of Jesus.

The second new piece for me is the fascinating similarity yet difference in our two Bible readings today about keeping quiet as to what is going on. As Elijah makes his farewell visits to Bethel and Jericho along with the one he has mentored, Elisha, the local prophets

challenge Elisha by saying, “Do you realise that Elijah will be taken away from you?” And twice Elisha can’t bear to think about it, he answers each time with anguish “Yes, I know, be silent”. He simply cannot bear to talk about it, and when Elijah is taken from him he tears his clothes in two in grief.

When the disciples and Jesus come down from their mountain-top experience Jesus orders them to tell no one about what they had just seen, until after he has risen from the dead. In their still gobsmacked state Peter, James and John receive this instruction, while wondering what Jesus could possibly mean by speaking of rising from the dead. It’s only after Jesus’ death and resurrection that the disciples come to comprehend the significance of what they’ve witnessed on the mountain – or rather, they come to comprehend the reality of Jesus’ resurrection because of what they witnessed on the mountain those months before. Elijah’s departure brings grief. Jesus never departs, he rises to new life, always to be with his people.

Which connects with the third new learning. As well as it being Transfiguration, it’s also a “Pre-figuration”. Jesus’ clothes became dazzling white, and the narrative emphasises “such as no one on earth could bleach them”. This is a glorified Jesus, it’s a preview of what heaven is like, it’s a foretaste of God’s gift of eternal life – and it even gives support to the notion that in eternal life we will be in relationship with those who’ve gone before us.

And the fourth new piece? We read of the Transfiguration every year on the Sunday before the commencement of Lent because during the six weeks of Lent we follow the path of Jesus from the high experience on the mountain-top down to the dreadful low of opposition, arrest, crucifixion in Jerusalem, then up again on Easter Day to the joy of resurrection, new life, God’s victory over the powers of sin and death. Lent is neatly bookended, with Transfiguration the Sunday before and Resurrection the Sunday after. As we follow the path of Jesus between these two high points, we find lots of hard sacrificial service, as Jesus cares for people with compassion and love, and cops in return opposition, rejection and even betrayal, taking it all with humility and love. God’s beloved Son gives of himself, day after day, in humble service.

So to conclude: the Transfiguration is the beginning of the end for Jesus. He comes down from the mountain, his mission affirmed by Moses and Elijah, and by God, and he serves, gives, loves, forgives, and exhausted, dies on the cross – and resurrection, victory, vindication, eternal life follows. That’s the path God calls us to follow too, receiving God’s love, giving of ourselves, living and dying in the knowledge and the faith that resurrection follows.

To the glory of God. Amen.