

## Transfiguration. August 6 2017. A gift of reassurance

“If I had words to make a day for you, I’d sing you a morning golden and new. I would make this day last for all time, give you a night deep in moonshine.” You may recognise that as Scott Fitzgerald’s song taking the theme from Camille Saint-Saëns. 3<sup>rd</sup> Symphony. And if you have seen the movie ‘Babe’ it will be even more familiar. It is a song about a gift, a gift of love.

That is what the Transfiguration is, which we remember and celebrate today in our liturgy (Mark 9:2-10). The Transfiguration of Jesus is a gift of love, given to those three disciples who were there, even though they didn’t have much of a clue what was going on at the time, and given to us as well.

In a way the event of the Transfiguration is a bit like a spoiler of the next episode! When we read this we get a glimpse of what is coming a bit later. Some people even thought for a while that this was a story from after Jesus’ resurrection which had been accidentally misplaced here at an earlier point in the story. But it is in the right place. It is a glimpse both of the future and it could also be said that those disciples were not just seeing the future but seeing Jesus as he truly IS.

Glimpsing a bit of the future is nothing new in the Biblical story. We see that sort of vision in the Old Testament reading from Daniel (Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14) and that grand dramatic vision of the heavenly court. This is high drama, a big stage production, an epic scene. It is echoed in the last book in our Bible, in what we call Revelation, with the dramatic depiction of the one who sits on the throne, wiping away all tears, bringing together the community, sorting and smoothing and putting everything to right and inviting us to enter into that same picture and connection.

In Paul’s first letter to the Christian community in Corinth (1 Corinthians 15) he had another angle on the theme of glimpses of the future. When people were worried about what had happened to those who believe who had died, and about what would happen to themselves too, Paul pointed out that *in his resurrection* Jesus was the sign of what would come for all of us, the ‘first fruits’ as he put it, the image for us of what a transformed future looks like beyond physical death. And what the disciples saw on that mountain of the Transfiguration was a first glimpse of that future for Jesus and for us.

So, what was going on up there on that mountain? Part of it was, as real estate agents say, location, location, location. Location matters. And the mountain where this event is believed to have happened is on the edge of a large plain. At the other end of the plain is the hill called Har Megiddo, from which we get the name ‘Armageddon’. This plain was where the last battle was supposed to be fought. So, in that location, in that context, there is a glimpse of a future which connects to the time when it was thought that all time was going to be wrapped up and tied together, the ‘i’s dotted, the ‘t’s crossed, the questions all answered and sorted out.

That is where Moses and Elijah come in. They are two of the great figures from the story of the people of God from the past. They were among those who were believed to have been able to see what was really happening, especially from God’s perspective. This is, for me, one of those conversations where I wish we had recorded what they actually said! Like Jesus on the road to Emmaus with the two disciples in Luke 24, when he explained to them how everything about his life and message made sense, starting with Moses and the prophets. Great! So, what was actually said? We don’t know, but putting those pieces together, like putting together the pieces of life including the glimpse which is the gift in the Transfiguration, is part of what we do here, week by week.

This gift, this glimpse, leads to resilience. It leads to hope. We are connected to one who is more than just a good eloquent teacher. It took the disciples a while to get that. Jesus was more than just another rabbi with a great way with words and a wonderful way of explaining things. We read from Mark chapter 9 this morning. If you look back into Mark chapter 8, Jesus asked the disciples “Who do you say that I am?” and we hear Peter declaring that Jesus is the Messiah. Of course he is. But the disciples still had very little idea of what that actually meant. On the top of that mountain overlooking the plain where some thought that the messiah would lead a battle to end all battles the voice of God didn’t say “Here is my commander in chief. Follow him into battle.” The voice of God declared “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” The secure future is not going to come through a battle but through deep listening to this beloved Son.

If I had words to make a day for you ... if I had words to show you the future ... what would I tell you? What would you want to know as a glimpse of the future? What would be the best gift to be given in those words? Would it be next week’s lotto numbers? Would it be understanding and wisdom? Would it be having the capacity to know what is going to happen and so perhaps being able to prevent or change certain things? Would it be answers to big questions, like why are we here and what comes next??

If you could get a glimpse of life as it is, the sort of glimpse which sustains us, and which puts life into a whole new perspective ... what would that look like? Jesus on the mountain, especially understood once we have the rest of the picture, knowing about his resurrection, gives that sort of changed perspective on life, and death and what gives meaning to life here and now. Listening to him, as the voice of God from the cloud suggested, becomes even more important.

The gift is not just the words of Jesus though. As I was saying last week it is also the connection, the relationship. Tied up in the gift and the invitation and what this means as a glimpse of the future is an expression of love. We don't have to be on that mountaintop to get that glimpse and that gift though. It is all very nice reading about a gift given to someone else and being able to say 'yay for you'. When, in a big way or a subtle way, have you seen that glimpse of God's love for yourself? As I visit, as we talk and we share this journey together I hope that you will share with me times and ways that you have come to realise that you are loved by God.

I am going to share with you two of those experiences now. One is mine. Another comes from someone else. Sometimes our inspirations will come from others around us or those who have written things which we can read and reflect on. I never got to meet the person whose experience I am going to share, which is not surprising since she lived in England in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. This is the experience of a deeply spiritual woman whose name we don't really know but who is remembered as Julian of Norwich. Notice as I share her words that she is saying that this is a realisation, a revelation, she had for us, for us all, not just for herself. In the fifth chapter of the account of her 'Revelations of Divine Love' (Chapter 5, Penguin Classics version, pp 67-68) she wrote:

"It was at this time that our Lord showed me spiritually how intimately he loves us. I saw that he is everything that we know to be good and helpful. In his love he clothes us, enfolds and embraces us; that tender love completely surrounds us, never to leave us. As I saw it he is everything that is good. And then he showed me a little thing, the size of a hazelnut, on the palm of my hand, round like a ball. I looked at it thoughtfully and wondered: 'What is this?' And answer came: 'It is all that is made.' I marvelled that it continued to exist and did not suddenly disintegrate; it was so small. And again my mind supplied the answer: 'It exists, both now and for ever, because God loves it.' In short, everything owes its existence to the love of God."

It was a glimpse of what truly is. It was a gift to Julian which helped her to see the world and herself and others more deeply. Not unlike that gift of the Transfiguration.

My story is a bit simpler. I was sitting in the garden one day while at theological college at a time when lots of my life seemed to be unravelling. As I sat I felt an arm around my shoulders but when I looked around I could not see anyone there. Yet I knew I was being embraced. The decisions I then had the courage to take meant that I left theological college for a while and the experience was validated for me when I arrived in the ecumenical community of Taizé and one of the first things that I saw when I entered the Church of the Resurrection there was a large copy of a 7<sup>th</sup> century Coptic icon of Jesus and a believer, and Jesus had his arm around that guy's shoulder.

At the heart of the Transfiguration and Julian's vision and my time in the garden was an encounter. It was an encounter with love. The encounter didn't solve all problems in an instant, but transfigured those receiving the experience. That is actually one of the startling things about the transfiguration itself. It is not actually about Jesus changing. He didn't change. What the disciples, and others, all the way down to us, see in him changes us, transfigures us, renews and transforms and inspires us. That is what makes the Transfiguration truly a gift.

It is particularly appropriate to be celebrating the Transfiguration on this day when we also remember Mary Sumner and the foundation of the Mother's Union throughout the world. Responding to Jesus is not just about our personal connection or what we think about him. It is what we do with that. The Mother's Union was founded as a way to assist women of faith to be supporting one another and working together to be the hands and feet of Christ to the community around. Earlier this year I was in South Sudan assisting with the establishment of a Primary Health Clinic in Bor. While there we met with the local Minister of Health who asked us "Now the Mother's Union is involved in this aren't they?". As Lindy Driver, wife of the former Archbishop of Adelaide said to him, "Of course minister! As you know, in Africa, nothing happens in and through the church without the Mother's Union!". He laughed, but also nodded, because it really is true!

Lives are transformed by witnessing the glimpses we have of the love and hope and promise of God in Jesus. We share the glimpses and we live the response.

Amen.

**Paul Mitchell**