**St Andrew’s on The Terrace Sunday 12 March 2017 Lent Two**

**Psalm 121 A song of ascents.**

1 I lift up my eyes to the mountains — where does my help come from? 2 My help comes from the Maker of heaven and earth. 3 Your foot will not be allowed to slip; the one who watches over you will not slumber; 4 indeed, the one who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. 5 You are watched over you—there is a shade at your right hand; 6 the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night. 7 You will be kept from all harm — your life will be cherished; 8 your coming and going will be watched over both now and forevermore.

**Matthew 17:1-9 The Transfiguration**

17 After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. 2 There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. 3 Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. 4 Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters — one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” 5 While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!” 6 When the disciples heard this, they fell face down to the ground, terrified. 7 But Jesus came and touched them. “Get up,” he said. “Don’t be afraid.” 8 When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus. 9 As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, “Don’t tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

**A Sonnet for the feast of the Transfiguration** from *Sounding the Seasons* by Malcolm Guite

For that one moment, in and out of time,

On that one mountain where all moments meet,

The daily veil that covers the sublime

In darkling glass fell dazzled at his feet.

There were no angels full of eyes and wings

Just living glory full of truth and grace.

The Love that dances at the heart of things

Shone out upon us from a human face

And to that light the light in us leaped up,

We felt it quicken somewhere deep within,

A sudden blaze of long-extinguished hope

Trembled and tingled through the tender skin.

Nor can this, this blackened sky, this darkened scar

Eclipse that glimpse of how things really are.

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I had to laugh when I saw the choice of readings for today in the lectionary. The Sunday before Lent started was officially Transfiguration Sunday - Harriet was working in the office at the time and had named the order of service accordingly. I explained we would not be going all-out on transfiguration that day – someone else was doing the reflection anyway and that I personally was really pleased because I spent most years around this time trying to avoid the transfiguration! We probably broke the lectionary rules by calling the Sunday Epiphany 8, keeping calm and carrying on. Then like the hound in the poem ‘The Hound of Heaven’, the transfiguration catches up with me again this week! There was a choice, but I figured it was a fair cop and I should woman up to the task!

Why do I find this a task? Firstly, though I am quite a soft touch when contemplating miracles and such like, ready to accept symbolic explanations, somehow this scene up Mt Tabor almost defeats me. It is not just the glowing white brightness enveloping Jesus – on Christmas Eve a women I do not know told me on her way out of the church that she had seen an aura shining around me during the service. I know some people see auras and that varying colours convey the state of the person at the time. So, in a moment of particular spiritual illumination, if you will excuse the pun, Jesus could well have seemed to his disciples to glow, and not just with perspiration. It could even be thought of as a ‘specially holy case of human flourishing which is the hot topic of the week after the Study Trust lecture this past week.

But then we find it is not only Jesus glowing but also a seeming re-appearance of Moses and Elijah – two men who lived thousands of years earlier. If we can put a date on them, (pre-history being notoriously unreliable date wise), we would put Moses at about 1500 BCE and Elijah about 800 BCE. It would be not unlike us when we celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in October this year, finding Jean Calvin or John Knox or Ulrich Zwingli were among us, along with Jesus himself. That *would* be a worry!

Such stories do often have some basis in fact which began the account with later embellishments and accretions swelling the legend into a myth. That this story rather than other stories made it down the centuries to us si something which can be taken seriously – it suggests there is mileage in this narrative which can inform us now. Or, we can be tempted to brush it all aside as so much primitive claptrap.

It is hard to know what people of the time thought of this story. Did they think Jesus, Moses and Elijah were all *really* there, or that the disciples were seeing visions, or apparitions? Or did they recognise the story as a story written from scratch to make a particular point? Just as a painter might depict Queen Elizabeth II in the same painting as Elizabeth I discussing the difficulties of ruling England, so the narrator here, may have placed the characters in this story to compare and contrast.

Moses was the archetypal patriarch of the Jewish nation. He was the legendary leader who was God’s front-man delivering the people from slavery. He was aided by his sister Miriam and Aaron, but it was Moses who got to be the most famous of the three. So much so, that Exodus 20 gets attributed to him though it was probably Miriam’s song. (You can tell women are around because tambourines are mentioned.) The Exodus story got built up and built up over the years, midrash after midrash, adding layers of interpretations. Moses becomes a colossus, someone in whose company you would be very pleased to be found so some of the glory might rub off on you.

Elijah is the great stand-out prophet from the 9th century BCE. He lived around a century after Solomon, when the nation had split into two kingdoms. It is he who goes head to head with the rival prophets of Baal, it is he who listens for God’s voice in the wind earthquake and fire but hears it in the sheer sound of silence.

These are the cool guys of Jewish history and you would want to be in their gang. If they choose you as a gang member, you would be ‘in’ with the rest, no question. If Jesus were a prime minister and he was being interviewed in one of the media scrums you see filmed in the halls of parliament to have Elijah, minister of prophecy, and Moses, minister of refugee’s affairs, behind each shoulder, would make the best photo opportunity of the time. With back up from these two guys who needs fear any enemies? This story lifts Jesus into superstar status at least for a brief few minutes.

And *that* seems to be the point of this story. Looking at the Gospels as a whole, this is the watershed between Jesus’ ‘ordinary life’ and his life as a preacher. This incident marks the point around about which time Jesus famously sets his face towards Jerusalem. This story tells his followers that the man turning towards Jerusalem where they all know danger awaits him, is no ordinary itinerant preacher. He is one of the top men in the faith. He rubs shoulders, almost literally here, with two of the greatest – the great deliverer and the great prophet. So Jesus must be the great ..... what? Perhaps that decision is left up to the disciples then and today that decision is for us to make. Jesus is your great ....what? Think about that this week.

As to the transfiguring part. Malcom Guite is a poet and singer songwriter whom we met in Cambridge England in 2013. We had gone to what had formerly been a Goth Eucharist from 2008-2014 and which was still a deliberately darkly themed liturgy held monthly in a very old church in the centre of the medieval town – the church of St Edward King and Martyr, dating from Saxon times, though the present building was 13th century.

Malcolm led the service and his dual skills as poet and liturgy writer and singer songwriter were evident in the way he led the evening. We went to the pub afterwards with the small group of locals who obviously support and run the monthly event. Malcolm[[1]](#footnote-1) is a combination of contemporary and old-school- liturgical in his approach. In his poem he focuses on the resonance between Jesus’s glowing figure and the light within us which responds to that illumination. I think maybe the key lines of the sonnet are those in the centre of the poem: *There were no angels... Just living glory full of truth and grace/ The Love that dances at the heart of things/Shone out upon us from a human face/ And to that light the light in us leaped up,/We felt it quicken somewhere deep within.*

There are moments in all our lives. As I express in the poem for this week in the booklet of Lenten reflections: *I’ve known moments a little like that/ when my life changed and was never the same again./ No bright white auras or famous prophets,/ sometimes just a small child saying something profound,/ or a stunning sunset lending golden glow to an old shed,/ or the first quiet sip of a delicious cup of tea filling a parched body with delight./ In those moments all seems to come to one point of,/ ecstasy seems too flashy a word - rather, simply but significantly/ knowing/ in all its profundity. /All is transfigured,/ brought to one point,/ where everything makes sense.*

Part of the discipline of walking a spiritual path is to make sure we give ourselves moments in which to notice and appreciate and reflect on the transfiguring moments of our lives. That’s what church services and Lenten reflection groups are intended to achieve. Often we name these moments as times of community and they are. But I wonder if in celebrating community we use it to conveniently ignore the quiet insistent call deep at the heart of ourselves to connect with the sacred within us. To turn aside, to climb a mountain, to look within in.

If you have come to a very rational point in your spiritual journey and dropped like a hot potato the methods of prayer and times of devotion you might have engaged in previously, what have you replaced them with? Being quiet and still can bring innumerable benefits. It gives you those moments when we notice ‘the Love that dances at the heart of things’ shining out upon us from a human face and to that light the light in leaps up and we feel it quicken somewhere deep within.

As we practice that habit of finding a still moment, creating spaces of quiet within our lives, we get better at noticing what is important, we get better at disrupting our routines for supporting those who really need it. Our minds being more still, our imaginations have more room to move and work out what’s really going on here.

A heart which is used to noticing the truly transfiguring moments, will be quiet and calm enough to truly meet another when you are introduced or smile and say hello to someone you know already. Your presence will reach out and connect with their presence and you will both be standing on holy ground – together – whether that becomes conscious for you both or not. In those moments of meeting “All is transfigured, brought to one point, where everything makes sense.”

One of our busy spaces in this community is the notices. Not just the verbal notices, but the written ones as well, which is why you got a special flier in your order of service last week, printed in colour, with the details of a meeting last Thursday. It was about transgender rights. Some of you may not have recognised the name of the presenter, but Jem was the trans woman who spoke at the Transgender Day of Remembrance in November here when the Glamaphones came to sing. That’s one of those details we might need a still heart to connect with and remember. Then had you looked at that flier carefully and quietly you might have thought that it is not an easy thing for a trans woman to speak about trans human rights, since they shouldn’t be any different from anyone else’s human rights. You might also have noticed a reluctance within you to bother about such a meeting.

These reflections hopefully would have led to you changing your usual Thursday night plans and coming to that seminar. Coming to educate yourself, coming to support what might be the most discriminated against group in New Zealand. Not going to the event because it would entertain or amuse or relax you but because it would inform you and support others – others who are the ‘t’ in the acronym ‘lgbt’ and therefore one of those communities which this church has earned a reputation for supporting. Today your quiet stilled heart might hear the question arising in my mind, “Do we deserve such a reputation?”

Today, let your quietened heart notice that this Thursday the second in this 2-seminar series is being held, this time with what we could call an outside speaker, from the Human Rights Commission. I do so hope that he will not find his audience is 5 people as Jem found last week. If you are a gold card holder you will need to pay for the public transport to come to the meeting, but you will get a free ride home. If you have a choir practice; that happens every week, this is an annual event. If the transgender community are going to ever be in a place where they too can have a still heart and a calm mind and be able themselves to notice the transfiguring moments of their own lives, they need now something a lot better than a 40 year waiting list for surgical health care and 5 people attending meetings bravely offered to the public.

The principle then behind the transfiguration moment, is that of taking the time, of making the moment when there is room and space for the deepness of what is within us to connect with the centuries-old stream from which legendary deliverers, prophets and teachers drew their strength. Like Moses, like Elijah, like Jesus, like other pioneers who have gone before us, letting the sacred moments be in our lives is call, an imperative and a gift.

*...living glory full of truth and grace*

*The Love that dances at the heart of things*

*Shone out upon us from a human face*

*And to that light the light in us leaped up,*

*We felt it quicken somewhere deep within.*

May you have many transfiguring moments in your life. May that be so.

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**Stepping up the Mountain Lent Two Matthew 17: 1-9**

It seemed Jesus was stepping up

his disciples’ experience.

Choosing three whom he thought would appreciate it,

he takes them up the sacred mountain

and there, - well, I’ve never been to a transfiguration

so I only have their word for it,

with perhaps some embellishment over the centuries -

but it seemed to involve great, white, brightness,

(an aura perhaps) and visions

of Israel’s most famous leader and prophet,

Moses and Elijah,

large as life and twice as terrifying.

Jesus was transfigured we are told

and so were his disciples!

With astonishment and,

if they were truly human,

not only a little fear.

I’ve known moments a little like that

when my life changed and was never the same again.

No bright white auras or famous prophets,

sometimes just a small child saying something profound,

or a stunning sunset lending golden glow to an old shed,

or the first quiet sip of a delicious cup of tea

filling a parched body with delight.

In those moments all seems to come to one point of,

* ecstasy seems too flashy a word -

rather, simply but significantly

*knowing*

in all its profundity.

All is transfigured,

brought to one point,

where everything makes sense. Susan Jones 2017

1. https://malcolmguite.wordpress.com/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)