

# The Transfiguration – mountains and valleys

Sermon by the Rev Derek Lightbourne, St James August 2017

Keynote Bible passages: Luke 9.28 – 36, 2 Peter 1.16 – 19

Surely it was an extraordinary experience: climbing up a hill to spend some time in prayer, the disciples Peter, James and John, and Jesus. They witnessed Jesus change in appearance, his face shining and clothes becoming dazzling white. And even more, two people conversing - recognised as Moses and Elijah in their heavenly glory. Furthermore a voice heard 'from heaven' This is my Son whom I have chosen, listen to him.' What an extraordinary experience! How might it be explained? A vision? An exaggerated story by the three? (But why would they make it up?) An experience beyond description or understanding? Or – one doesn't know.

Yet it was real – as later testified in the second letter of Peter (today's epistle). 'We were there when he was given honour and glory by God the Father, when the voice came to him from the Supreme glory, and we ourselves heard this voice coming from heaven, when we were with him on the holy mountain.' (2 Peter 1.17 – 18).

1] For me it comes in the category of a '*mountain-top experience*'. For the three disciples it pointed to Jesus as indeed being Son of God, and recognised his divine authority. It was so very special, sacred indeed and Luke tells us they initially told no one of their experience. What then about 'mountain top' experiences? For this was not the only one, and humans use that imagery for exceptional circumstances. I recall such an instance a few years ago when we were living in Christchurch and my parish included part of the Port Hills. One day when in need of some quiet prayer and reflection time I drove up to the road and parked the car. It was late afternoon and unexpectedly a veil of billowing white cloud came over the top of the hill, like a giant wave building up to crash on the seashore. Only it was as the glory of God enveloping me and hiding the view of the city way below. It was almost fear-inducing, and yet there was a sense of inner peace. It was a vivid experience and has stayed with me over the years. If I may venture to suggest it was like the experience of those three disciples and I'm not surprised they didn't know what to do or say. Yet it was a profound spiritual experience and stayed with them. We will never know the intensity of how it was for them, I believe we are given to know and experience the presence of the Lord Jesus and glimpse the glory of God. Such can be beyond explanation. Yet also they can be faith-encouragement. Just as the disciples they can lead to a deeper certainty of faith, and direction in life. They occur unexpectedly and can imprint in our mind's eye. As I pondered the experiences of these it was helpful to discover others had similarly, and called them 'lived moments'. They have a sense of timelessness, when all around come 'alive' and divine presence is so near. They have been further described as the '*grace of the lived moment*' that God has given these. Another for me in church context and very profound was to enter Chartres Cathedral in France. Going in from the summer daylight it seemed quite gloomy, and all around there were two levels of stained glass windows, so beautiful in their variety of themes. Then as I was sitting there taking in this spiritual experience a visiting choir began to

sing. This brought tears of emotion, and to stay in such and let them flow. Thus in the beauty of creation or in worship experiences we can also experience the grace of the lived moment.

Over the years in ministry folk have shared with me, describing times of extraordinary spiritual experience. Most often they are not easy to explain, and yet they have been an encouragement in faith, in direction in life, and vivid in the memory. Some have come in vivid dreams, in 'life beyond life' (near death experiences). Sometimes they are shared in loving friendships – 'the communion of the Holy Spirit' present, and solitary. Real too, as it was for those disciples and yet while real, they are rarely shared for fear of ridicule or misunderstanding. Thus I don't believe we should seek them, yet we can be open to such happening. And when experienced, not to belittle the reality. Indeed one time I was leading worship in a church on the Kapiti Coast and in the silence after communion the musicians began to sing a sacred song inviting 'Spirit of God, breath on me...' and it was as a gentle breath of wind actually was blowing. I was so emotionally affected by this sense of holy 'presence' after the service I asked another person who I knew to be spiritually sensitive whether they had sensed it, and they agreed.

2] *Valley experiencing.* However, there's an important caution about have these mountain-top experiences. It is well portrayed in the painting of the Transfiguration by Raffaello. At the top of the painting is Jesus with Moses and Elijah. Towards the bottom down the mountain is a man pleading with other disciples for his son, in dire straits. [Show].

The artist has conjoined the two episodes into one. It is a message for us in our Christian life there's both, mountain-top, and 'valley', reflecting the ups and downs of daily living. Our faith cannot be solely based on transcendent experiences, it also needs to be set amongst day to day events and relationships – at home, in place of employment and in the community. In these places God also is with us. Remember the Psalmist - '...as I walk through the valley... you are with me, your rod and staff they comfort me.' I've no doubt we have all experienced these, also unexpected. In this it is surely helpful to sense God's presence, and this can be as someone walks with us along that difficult and rough road. Friends, family members, church community folk are so important, being there, with us, for us, and we with another.

*In summary* then, the Transfiguration of Jesus was a profound spiritual experience, and it was for the three disciples given to witness it, and indeed it was so spiritual for them, and an assurance of who Jesus was, and for us, is. Surely it is the grace of the lived moment. The collect of today suggests that we are transformed by these experiences: 'You show us yourself O God.....grant that by our glimpses of him and our listening to him, *we may be changed into his glorious likeness.*' That's a powerful insight in its occurring!

Most of our life is lived down the mountain, and there also, God is, and there we can receive inner strength, purpose and guidance and these are also transformative.