

St. Margaret's Uniting Church, Mooroolbark

Sunday 26th February, 2017 - Transfiguration Sunday

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

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!' When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Get up and do not be afraid.' And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, 'Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.'

REFLECTION ON THE SCRIPTURES

There are many stories in the bible of shekinah. It is a word that Jewish Rabbis use to convey the idea that God comes to meet us, to dwell near us. And often that presence is one of such brilliance that it is almost beyond humans to bear. There was a time when Moses encounters God in a cloud and wants to see God face to face. But God responds 'you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.' (Exodus 33:20). And so Moses has to hide in a crag of a rock as the glory of God passes him.

Thankfully there are other ways the shekinah of God is known and encountered. One that we spoke about recently was the pillar of fire that guided the people of Israel in the night time as they were being led by God out of Egypt.

Shekinah manifests in a frightening way in the New Testament when Saul is blinded by the light on the road to Damascus. In perhaps the most dramatic

repentance or turning around in the bible, Saul is transformed by this and some follow up encounters. First, he is rendered helpless through being blinded. And then at the mercy of others, he is offered a way into life known through Jesus Christ. Where he was the most zealous opponent of the early church, he is given a new name. The apostle Paul, as we know him, becomes the most enthusiastic evangelist – for he has encountered the glory of God and found life like he had never known before.

And that is perhaps what the Transfiguration of Jesus Christ is for. Returning to the idea of Shekinah, this moment of encounter on the mountain top is linked to when Jesus was baptised. You may remember that at the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan river by John, a voice from the cloud said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased' (Matthew 3:17). It is a Shekinah moment, where the dwelling of God is so close that we are touched and moved by it. Celtic spirituality speaks of places where the veil between heaven and earth is very thin.

And now, as Jesus is Transfigured on the mountain top, we hear the words of blessing again. 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased.' Jesus has become the dwelling place for the glory of God. Rev Dr Douglas Galbraith writes that while Jesus was praying, the appearance of his face changed. It wasn't like someone was shining a light on the outside, rather *the light which transfigured him completely was shining from inside. The transfiguration was not the throwing away of the mask of humanity. It was not ceasing to be human. It was the human Jesus who was transfigured. The face that was radiant and shone was the human face of the human Jesus. It was the radiant face of a Son who submitted himself to obey God's will; his cross was the secret of the radiance and transfiguration. (Church of Scotland, Starters for Sunday, 26th Feb, 2017).*

As Jesus is Transfigured, there are divine words from the cloud. And as they echo the blessing words of baptism, there is also something extra at the end. God calls us to 'Listen to him.' We are invited to listen to the one who has become the dwelling place for the glory of God. So what does Jesus say?

Well the first thing is 'get up and do not be afraid'. If history had told them that the glory of God was capable of completely overwhelming them, if such

glory was to be feared like a refining fire, now that same glory was an invitation to get up and continue and not to be afraid. I'd like to say it was given because we need no longer fear the refining fire of God. But it seems it is a call to stay close to both refining fire and glory all at once – and that these things will carry us to our destination.

This is because something important happens just before this Transfiguration moment. There is a difficult conversation between the disciples and Jesus. Peter has blurted out that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of the living God. But in the same breath he wants to stop Jesus talking honestly about the path ahead. Jesus tells them that he will suffer and die. The dwelling place of God will be destroyed, but after three days he will be raised from the dead. As Peter protests and is warned not to be a stumbling block, Jesus says that to follow him, we must deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow. They are difficult and challenging words, but the Transfiguration is perhaps just the thing to help us journey together with Christ on the path we would all rather avoid.

For Jesus is now the dwelling place for Shekinah, the glory of God. And as he leaves the mountain top and returns to the plane, he travels the same roads that we travel. And God knows that those roads can be hard. But God is offering the light of Christ to be our companion, our light for the path. In every small step we make, we are offered the very presence of God revealed to us through Jesus Christ. We are invited to let go of our old ideas about all that makes humans feel powerful, and follow Jesus on a different journey. We no longer need be afraid of the usual powers that seem to threaten and take life. We no longer need be afraid of being distant from the love of God. We no longer need to fight in response to our fears, for the light has come and it can never be extinguished.

It is why we are still here in 2017, thousands of years since Peter and the others encountered the glory of God on that mountain top. It is why we are here to recall what Christ has called us to in the last year. It is why we are here to journey into a future with God. The glory of God is with us. It is closer than we could ever have imagined. It is our companion through all of life's moments, and it calls us to shine the glory of God in this place. Our call is to

let go of whatever gets in the way of God, and take that step towards the glorious presence of the one who brings life eternal.

Transfiguration - Matthew 17: 1-9

there is a place
where heaven's cloud
embraces earth
and ancients meet
and faithful fearful fall
at his feet
where shekinah shines
 unperturbed
 untranslated
 undisturbed

there is a place
where holy touch
embraces fear
and veils are thin
and listening
becomes the path
where life is heard
and ears are
freshly opened
to the word

there is a place
where mystery's cloud
embraces flesh
within each soul
and heaven's cry
calls clear:
you are my child
get up

and do not fear. *Dad & Daughter, Poems by Jennie Gordon © 2012*