

## Mark 9:2-8 – The Transfiguration

Parish of Richmond

27<sup>th</sup> July 2014.

Last Wednesday I was driving home after popping in to spend some time with Bishop Derek and Alice. So I was a little later than usual.

I was driving around the water-front in Atawhai. It was an hour before high tide so the water was in and as still as glass – there wasn't a ripple anywhere. I noticed a young couple down at the edge of the water with a camera set up on a tripod – not an unusual sight to see around that stretch of road at sunset – but then came this amazing moment in which the colours of the sunset were mirrored in the water and the world around became dark because of the incredible explosion of colour from both the water and the sky. There was a transparency – as if heaven had just broken through. I stopped the car as soon as I found a spot and grabbed my cell-phone to get a photo but the moment had passed and the colours had faded.

It was so dramatic.

I tried to describe it to Hilary 5 minutes later at home but found that I didn't have the words to explain what I had just experienced.

How do you describe the indescribable?

How do you explain the unexplainable?

Those questions are posed by this morning's Gospel reading from the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter of Mark – the story of the transfiguration.

How do you describe the indescribable?

How do you explain the unexplainable?

Maybe we start by digging into the text briefly.

Mark 9, verses 2-4.

*'And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus.'*

'After six days' – seems to be a bit pedantic to reflect on these words. Except for the account of the death and resurrection of Jesus this is the only time in the whole of Mark's Gospel that Mark puts some sort of time frame on what is happening. It is six days after what has gone before it.

I could spend time reflecting on the significance of the six days, but what is far more important is the fact that these three words link us to what has come directly before it and that helps us understand the transfiguration – but I'll come back to that shortly.

*'... after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain by themselves.'*

Peter, James and John: Jesus certainly chose an interesting bunch of characters as his disciples. I'm absolutely certain that these three wouldn't have made it through the ordination process of our Diocese had they applied!

Peter was far too impetuous – had the habit of saying the first thing that came into his mind without processing it first.

James and John – known as the 'sons of thunder' because of their short fuses.

But they were Jesus' closest disciples – they were the ones that Jesus invited to be present when he raised Jairus's daughter from the dead.

They were the three who stayed closest to him in the garden of Gethsemane.

And they were the three who (together with the Apostle Paul) were foundational to the formation of the Church.

It's really interesting that Mark's account draws several parallels to Moses being called by God to go up Mount Sinai. He takes three named people with him (Joshua,

Aaron and Hur) - together with '70 of the elders') Although they were not allowed to go up the mountain with Moses they still witnessed the Shekinah glory of God (Exodus 24:9-11)

The parallels here are quite huge and obviously Mark sees it as a guide to understand something of the transfiguration.

*... after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain by themselves.'*

Tradition says that this 'high mountain' is Mount Tabor – about 11 miles south-west of the Sea of Galilee. But the Bible makes it pretty specific that this whole passage is set around Caesarea Philippi which is the location of Mount Hermon.

Also, Mount Tabor is only about 1000 feet high and at the time of Jesus there was a fortress on top. It is much more likely that this event took place on Mount Hermon which is about 9000 feet high – where the solitude would be much more complete. Modern scholarship strongly confirms Mount Hermon – even though the Orthodox Church has its very old Church of the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor!

Today Mount Hermon forms the border between Syria and Israel. On the summit there is the highest and oldest fully manned United Nations observation post in the world. Its southern slopes – the Israeli side hosts the only ski resort in Israel and part of its lower slopes are the infamous Golan Heights.

*‘And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them.’*

This wasn’t on the radar for Peter, James and John as they climbed the slopes of Mount Herman but suddenly, when they found themselves totally alone, Jesus was ‘transfigured.’

An interesting word.

It comes from the Greek word ‘metamorphoo’ which can be translated as ‘transfigured’ or ‘transformed.’

It describes the process that occurs when the caterpillar weaves itself into a chrysalis and then emerges as the monarch butterfly.

Except that Jesus was still clearly Jesus - which is why we prefer to use the word transfigured rather than transformed. It’s the same word used in Romans 12

when Paul encourages us (in this case to ‘be transformed by the renewing of your minds.’).

Matthew’s Gospel describes it this way:

*‘His face shone like the sun and his clothes became as white as the light.’*

Luke writes that:

*‘The appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning’*

How do you describe the indescribable.

Mark doesn’t say anything about Jesus’ face. He simply writes:

*‘...his clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them.’*

Commentators are remarkably silent on what actually happened – they just let the Gospel accounts speak for themselves. Just one lovely quote from the ‘Theological Dictionary of the New Testament:

*‘For a moment they saw the human appearance of Jesus ‘changed into that of a heavenly being in a transfigured world.’*

But wait there’s more.

They were no longer alone.

*‘Jesus was transfigured before them, and his clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth*

*could bleach them. And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus.'*

Don't you love it.

Jesus, Elijah and Moses in one corner and Peter, James and John (three gibbering wrecks) in the other.

*'Rabbi, said Peter, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters – one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah. He did not know what to say, they were so frightened'*

Whenever he found himself in a challenging situation, Peter, rather than just being silent, would get a classic case of verbal diarrhoea!

Begs a little question here.

How did the three disciples know that these two new characters on the scene were Moses and Elijah?

The Gospels don't have any record of Jesus introducing them to the disciples. They certainly hadn't seen photos to know what Elijah and Moses looked like, and I doubt that they were wearing Church name tags!

They just knew....

And all they could do was stand in awe as Jesus, Elijah and Moses talked.

In the middle of their conversation the final dramatic moment: *'... a cloud appeared and enveloped them (the*

three disciples as well) *and a voice came from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"'*

It's interesting to do a quick flick back through the Old Testament here.

Exodus 24.

*'When Moses went up on the mountain, the cloud covered it, and the glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai..... on the seventh day the Lord called to Moses from within the cloud.'*

Exodus 40

*And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.*

2 Chronicles 5.

*'Then the temple of the Lord was filled with a cloud, and the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the temple.'*

God's glory or God's presence was often experienced from within a cloud and God's voice most often came from out of a cloud.

Looking ahead into the first chapter of Acts we read that:

*'After he had said this (Jesus being referred to) he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.'*

Again there is so much that can be teased out on this. But going back to Mount Hermon, the three disciples are experiencing what has become known as the 'Shekinah glory of God.'

And they hear the voice of God saying almost exactly the same thing that God had said as a dove came down at Jesus baptism.

*'This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him'*

It's those last three words that explain the significance of the transfiguration to the disciples - and for us today.

*'Listen to him!'*

But just to finish the story briefly

*'Suddenly when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus – everything was as it had been when they first got to the top of the mountain – just the three disciples with Jesus.....'*

Okay, what does it all mean – then and now?

I have tried to describe the indescribable.

How do we now begin to explain the unexplainable?

Let's just go back to those first few words in the passage – the only time they are found in Mark's Gospel that indicate that this passage must be considered in the context of what has come directly before it.

Mark chapter 8 – and you probably looked at this last week.

They are in the region of Caesarea Philippi (close to Mount Hermon) and Jesus asks his disciples a question, *'Who do people say that I am?'*

And they answer, *'Well some say you're John the Baptist, others think you're Elijah, and still others one of the prophets.'*

*“So what about you?” he asked, “Who do you say that I am.”*

This is the core question for us.

Who do you say that Jesus is?

If someone asks you to tell them about Jesus what do you say?

If someone asks you to talk about your faith, what do you say about Jesus?

Actually had a weird Bible Study the week before last when one of my fellow Bishops, who was leading the study, suggested that this passage was all about the disciples forming Jesus' understanding of who he was!!!

This time Peter gets the answer right, *'You are the Christ'* Matthew teases his answer out with a little bit more, *'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.'*

Jesus goes on to explain the ramifications of Peter's answer – that he will suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priest and teachers of the law and then he will be put to death...

Mark 8 says that Jesus *'spoke very plainly about this and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.'*

And Jesus responds in the harshest possible way to Peter *'Get behind me Satan.'*

Here's the thing.

Peter might have got the concept right.

But he was totally wrong about the reality.

He might have nailed the answer but he didn't understand the implications.

A right answer is not enough – Jesus' strong response to Peter suggests that a right answer with a wrong understanding is destructive to who Jesus really is and what he had come to do.

So *'Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach*

*them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus. And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him."*

The scales fell from the disciples eyes. Here, in the presence of Moses and Elijah they understood that Jesus was the fulfilment of all the law and the prophets. Here in the most radiant glory they understood that all he had said was true.

So much so that by the end of the second chapter of Acts, Peter is standing up in the centre of Jerusalem and telling the crowd that had gathered to *"Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself."*

And one of the other disciples up on that mountain went on to write in his letter to the Church. *'We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.'*

Two questions lead us to the transfiguration.

1. Who do people say that I am?

There are so many alternatives on offer today.

There's Therapist Jesus who helps us cope with life's problems, heals our past, tells us how valuable we are and not to be so hard on ourselves.

There's Starbucks Jesus who drinks fair trade coffee, loves spiritual conversations and who drives a hybrid..

There's Open-minded Jesus who loves everyone all the time no matter what, except for people who are not as open-minded as us.

There's sporting Jesus who helps athletes fun faster and jump higher than non-Christians and determines the outcomes of World Cups and super 15's.

There's Martyr Jesus, a good man who died a cruel death so we can feel sorry for him.

There's Gentle Jesus who was meek and mild, with high cheek bones, flowing hair, and walks around barefoot, wearing a sash and looks very European.

There's Hippie Jesus who teaches everyone to give peace a chance, imagine a world without religion, and helps us remember all you need is love.

There's Yuppie Jesus who inspires people to believe in themselves, encourages us to reach our full potential and lifts us up so we can walk on mountains.

There's Spiritual Jesus who hates religion, churches, pastors, priests, and doctrine; and would rather have people out in nature, finding the god within.

There's Revolutionary Jesus who teaches us to rebel against the status quo, stick it to the man, and blame things on the "system."

There's Guru Jesus, a wise, inspirational teacher who believes in you and helps you find your center.

There's Boyfriend Jesus who wraps his arms around us as we sing about his intoxicating love in our secret place.

And then there is the Jesus of the transfiguration – the glorified Christ who is not a reflection of the current mood or the projection of our own desires.

He is our Lord and God. He is the Father's Son, Savior of the world, and substitute for our sins – more loving, more holy, and more wonderfully awe-inspiring than we ever thought possible.

2. Who do you say that I am?