

One Degree of Glory to Another

(2 Cor 3:12 – 4:2 & Luke 9:28-42 – Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church on Feb 27th, 2022)

A long time ago I found myself flying over the desert in the centre of Australia. As I flew over the great expanse of red desert sands heading to Alice Springs it was sunset. I have never seen such colour, I sat transfixed by this as the sun set, as it went from one degree of glory to another.

Transformation is going on around us every day – as the seasons move from summer to autumn to winter and to spring. Nature is transforming everyday as well – trees lose leaves and prepare themselves to bear fruit later in the year, caterpillars change and before we know it they will become butterflies. Children grow taller, hold more complicated thoughts and can articulate them.

Art is also a process of transformation – a painter uses his or her colourful palette to bring the canvass alive, a potter sits at their wheel and transforms the clay into a vessel that is both useful and beautiful simply by the movement of their hands. A knitter changes a ball of wool into a work of art. Nature and art in all their forms are changing something from one degree of glory into another.

In our Scripture readings today, we hear Luke's description of a transformed Jesus and in Paul's letter to the Corinthians we find ourselves drawn up into the process of transformation, which is our goal – to be transformed into the image of God.

In Luke's story of the Transfiguration, we find him taking Peter, John and James up a mountain to pray. The three he takes with him show a significant choice, as these three will have very significant role in the early church. As he is praying Jesus is transformed – he is changed from one degree of glory into another. His appearance changes – his face and clothes become dazzling. More than that, two other men appear – Moses and Elijah and talk with him about the future, about what is to happen. Peter and the others are very sleepy, but somehow, they manage to stay awake. Because they stay awake, they see Jesus transfigured and if they didn't know it already, they now know they are in the presence of someone very special, very unique. As they prepare to leave, Peter shows that he knows what a significant event they have just witnessed. He comments about how wonderful it was, so wonderful in fact he wants to commemorate the occasion with a memorial – he wants to build three dwellings on the mountain top. As he is speaking, they are all engulfed in a cloud and the voice of God comes just like at Jesus baptism and says – this is my Son, my Chosen one, listen to him. They then make their way down the mountain only to be confronted by a man whose child has a demon, or what is more likely has epilepsy.

So, what does this story of transfiguration or transformation have to say to us? What is the transformation God wants for us? How are we being changed from one degree of glory into another?

The first thing I notice is that they have gone up the mountain to pray. The bible is full of stories of where God is encountered in a special way up a mountain, in the midst of solitude. I may have told you the story about an experience I had once whilst on retreat. I was at the foot of a cross in a garden at the retreat centre shortly after my favourite

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uncle had died and was trying to make sense of it all, it was there that God spoke to me in a way I never had expected, experienced and that has rarely happened since. As I sat, my praying became visual and I saw Jesus on the cross, weeping enormous tears that engulfed the crowd below – the crowd was huge and I was part of it. I knew at that moment that somehow Jesus shared in the pain of the whole world and for that moment the water of life consisted of his tears shed for all. I left that place changed, perhaps this was my transfiguration experience. And I am sure you have had your own experiences in your faith journey that have changed you, have turned you around, have been transformative.

The next thing I notice is that Jesus is not interested in having the moment immortalized. Jesus is not interested in static memorials, he is keen to get down the mountain and continue on with his ministry. When they get down from the mountain, they find that the world has not stopped. Whilst they have been up there, people in their joy and their pain, in their freedom and in their torment have gone on living their lives. And I guess the experience up the mountain, counts for nothing, if they cannot do or practice their faith, down on the plain. Down where the rubber hits the road. There is a sense in which Peter and the others learn that if you follow Jesus, you can't seek refuge in a tent/building or in the past, escape is not an option as you seek to minister to all of human existence.¹

Whilst Jesus may have been transfigured on the mountaintop, I think Luke is telling us where real transformation, transfiguration should be taking place. It should be amongst the people, in the midst of the messiness of life. Jesus spends his life going about transforming people – fishermen become leaders, healers, teachers, proclaimers of good news, people who have been excluded are welcomed, tax collectors turn around and give up their pursuit of wealth to look after people.

A mountain top experience may be wonderful and change us but if it has no effect on the way we practice our faith and care for others, then we may as well leave it up the mountain.

So instead of hanging onto our rituals and our buildings for their own sake, how might we transform them so that they may be part of transforming the lives of others?

May we all go out into the week ahead and be willing to allow ourselves to be transformed more and more into God's likeness, to be transfigured so that others may be transformed. Amen.

¹ From Gutierrez p52-3