

Transfixed or Transfigured?

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church January 14th, 2021 – Mark 9:2-10)

When have you been absolutely mesmerized? Was it watching a sporting event? Perhaps someone giving a great speech? Maybe a moment out in the bush or by the beach or river? Maybe it was a deeply spiritual moment, an encounter with the living God. For me it was watching the sun set over Alice Springs from a plane.

Like me, did you want to capture that moment for ever? Do you relive it still? Did you want to hold onto it? I toyed with the idea of getting my camera out of the overhead locker, but worried the time taken to do that, would mean that I missed some of the sunset. I was also convinced, that no photo could have captured what I was seeing out the window, at least in a way that would do it any justice. So, I just watched, transfixed.

Peter, James and John are taken up a mountain by Jesus. Whilst there, they have an amazing experience. Before their very eyes Jesus is transformed, his clothes change to a dazzling white, but there is more, two other men appear – Moses & Elijah. Then there is more – a cloud hovers over them and the voice of God speaks. God, just like he did at Jesus' baptism, announces that Jesus is God's Son with whom he is pleased, and they are told to listen to him. Then in an instant, as quickly as they appeared, they are gone, and it is just them and Jesus.

Amazed and terrified they are not sure what to do. Peter, true to form says – well it is good to be here – bit of an understatement! And then he suggests they build three tents to commemorate this event.

No, says Jesus, and tells them on the way back down the mountain, that they are to keep quiet about this event.

This story is full of symbolism.

1. The mountain top: this has always been a place of encounter between humans and the divine.
2. White dazzling clothes: a kind of metamorphosis, a sign of belonging to the heavenly realm. It is like the inward being is being disclosed outwardly, Jesus divinity is on display for all to see.
3. Elijah and Moses: both of these men also encountered God on the mountaintop. They represent the history of the Jewish people. They are expected to play a role in establishing God's kingdom on earth.
4. Cloud: this symbolises the presence of God. The cloud has appeared before in their history, for forty years in the desert God accompanied the Israelites in a cloud.
5. Voice of God: in Mark's gospel we hear the same words 'This is my Son' at the beginning of the story at Jesus' baptism and we will hear it again at the end of the story. Here it is in the middle of the story reminding the disciples to listen to him.

Peter wants to hold onto that moment forever. He wants to retain the experience in some way. It is like he wants to provide some dwelling places for this heavenly group. To build some memorials.

How do we hang onto those special moments? I wanted to photograph the beauty I saw. Think about the times we put crosses on the side of the road after a tragedy – people

have to mark the moment that upended their lives. Think about all the memorials we have built to mark wars. Are church buildings a bit like that too?

This mysterious episode left those three disciples both puzzled and changed. At that point in time, they didn't really understand what was going to happen. They did however experience the closeness of God.

Then Jesus takes them back down the mountain to the plain. You always have to come down from the mountain, you can't stay there forever, you have to return to reality. It appears that you can't stop on the way when you are following Jesus. You can't seek refuge in a tent. Life has to be lived back down on the plain, life has to be lived in the reality of history. (G Gutierrez, 'Sharing the Word Through the Liturgical Year' pp.50-51.) On their arrival at the bottom of the mountain they are greeted by crowds of people eager for healing and are told that some of the disciples couldn't heal someone in need. This is where the rubber meets the road, reality kicks in.

After this amazing and terrifying experience Jesus tells them to keep quiet about it. What?? They are meant to carry that experience with them and not build a monument. Maybe it will provide them with strength as they go about their following of Jesus through thick and thin.

This story has many challenges for us.

1. What kind of memorials to faith do we want to build? Is it not enough to carry our experience with us as we go through life, as we go about ministry?
2. Why do we even want to build memorials – is it because we can't let go? Or do they remind us of a life changing experience that we can't afford to lose? Do they ever capture the grief and sadness or exhilaration they purport to represent? Do they take away our energy from getting on with what is most important – sharing God's love and compassion?
3. Are we fearful of going out and living? Do we feel safer surrounded by our memorials?
4. Are we prepared to take our experience of God with us into our living?
5. Do we want a static or dynamic memorial? A built memorial or a living one?
6. Are we transfixed to the moment rather than being transfigured by it?

Our answers to these challenges will affect the way we express our experience of God. It will affect the way we understand and do worship and mission. It will affect the way we use our resources and buildings. It will affect where we put our energies. Jesus calls us on to the road, to carry our experience of him with us as we go and use that to inspire us, drive us, strengthen us.

Brendan Byrne, an Australian biblical scholar, says about this story "We will sometimes be with Jesus on the mountain, mostly on the plain, whatever we feel at any particular moment, we will never be truly far from the One who is the source of our life and our hope." (B Byrne, 'A Costly Freedom – A Theological Reading of Mark's Gospel pp. 144-147)

May our life as a community be more about missioning than maintaining and memorialising. May we be transfigured not transfixed. Amen.