

Hinde Street Methodist Church
Sunday 3rd March 2019
11am Anita Oji

A Brilliant Awayday

In my professional life one of the ways we learned to manage pain and avoid giving drugs was to use behavioural therapy, that is we spent time explaining how pain enters our consciousness, how we deal with it and what make it increase or decrease, then we talk about how to mitigate or work with these ideas so that the pain does not increase or prevent a person from doing the things they want to do. It is a treatment that relies on change from within rather than being imposed by a regime of chemicals that have unwanted side effects. Perhaps you are familiar with such cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) because it is applied to all types of problems. It can bring moments of transfiguration when we see old things with new eyes; for example, you may still have back pain but knowing that it originates from muscles that you can have control over rather than from nerve damage which held you in fear, can be very liberating.

The word transfiguration comes from the Greek meaning to transform or change and it is applied to the event that we had read to us from Luke's gospel about Jesus and his friends, Peter, John and James who went on a hike up a mountain and there had a dramatic experience. I am not sure what the disciples expected. Luke explains that they were going to pray with Jesus. I wonder what they would have packed since the mountain in question is usually identified as Mount Hermon, the nearest one to the town they were at, Caesarea Philippi. Mt Hermon is snow capped for much of the year and of its three peaks, the highest is 9200feet (or in metric units 2804m). It is the source of the river Jordan and the air is full of moisture, an environment captured in verse by the Psalmist (Psalm 133) when she or he describes folk living together in peace as the dew from Mount Hermon falls, sprinkling everything with Gods blessings.

So the event begins with an awayday, perhaps to get to know each other better, just as we might plan for the church council or similar groups. Food and water seem to be inconsequential since they are not mentioned but to me they would be critical because the hike they were on was strenuous. Probably water was abundant in streams and such like and foraging was adequate; alternatively similar to when armies used to go to go on the move, the women followed and cooked with whatever they could find. It was a few days after Jesus had fed the 5000 so maybe that experience had created no urgency for sustenance. Peter, John and James must have found the pull up the hills tiring because once they got to the place, they fell asleep. Of the gospel accounts of the transfiguration, in Matthew, Mark and Luke, only Luke records them sleeping and then waking to see Jesus in glory. Jesus had been praying; there was change in his face and clothes and Moses and Elijah were recognised to be talking with him, presumably in words they could all understand. They spoke about Jesus' death in Jerusalem, his resurrection and ascension and what it would mean. Peter who felt a need to do something (probably today you would take a selfie) entered the conversation and suggested building shelter or tents for Jesus, Moses and Elijah and this gets reported ungraciously; then all of them get enveloped in cloud and mist, as you can be on a high mountain. You can feel the misty coldness in their fear as reported, yet in this changed environment comes a voice: 'This is my chosen Son. Listen to what he says.' It echoes God speaking at the baptism of Jesus (Matthew 3 v17) 'This is my own dear Son, and I am pleased with him'. The three disciples and Jesus stayed

on the mountain overnight and walked down the next day. It was a remarkable experience waking up to see the glory of Jesus and experiencing God's affirmation of Jesus as his Son. Would you have kept quiet about it as it is reported the disciples did for some time? The more interesting question is who would believe you?

What is the significance of this event for us?

I have always assumed that it was a glimpse of God's glory, a majestic, brightness that reaffirmed the eternal power of God. In my mind Jesus' face shines like the sun, as Matthew describes, and he has clothes as white as light signifying another dimension to life that we can scarcely get a grip on with our sensory limitations. Even the TV adverts for clothes whiter than white do not stretch my imagination so far as these bible passages. Yet as I delved deeper into the text I found that the word 'glory' is a translation of not one but several Hebrew words which ranged far beyond my ideas of whiter than white. I know no Hebrew or Greek and have to depend on scholarship to broaden my knowledge but what I found was that one root is a word for heavy or weighty. To me as a scientist my mind went to the heavy metals such as gold, silver and platinum which shine when you polish them, and then to heavy isotopes such as uranium, so called because they have more neutrons than normal giving them a bigger mass which powers a fifth of our electricity use including cars, shops, mobile phones, computers and lighting; it is interesting to consider that something heavy can generate light across cities, across the world. Another Hebrew word for glory has an aesthetic dimension that describes, splendour, honour and sovereignty as we read in the psalms 'The glory of God is greater than heaven and earth' (Psalm 148 v13) and in the prophets 'The brightness of your glory covered the heavens – your glory shone like the sun...hiding your mighty power' (Habakkuk 3v3). So the word glory has a complex of meanings that spreads into areas of sensations and mysteries greater than our combined experiences and imaginings. But glory is only a small part of the significance of the transfiguration because the Bible is riddled with God's glory but not with this type of present event.

I have first to consider the context of the transfiguration with you in order for us to get a grip on its significance.

In Luke's gospel it comes, as I have mentioned, soon after the feeding of the 5000, one of Jesus' miracles. In the wake of this Jesus sits down with his disciples and asks them 'what do people say about me?' It is Peter who answers (Luke 9 v20) 'You are the Messiah sent by God'. Then Jesus speaks to his disciples of his suffering, death and resurrection. This plan of action must have been unsettling, to say the least, to the disciples who had given up their livelihoods to spend time with Jesus. For Jesus here comes the transition point in his life so far. He takes three close friends up a mountain, prays/speaks to God his Father, has his affirmation that the plan is to go to Jerusalem, face crucifixion, death as a human and then in the resurrection and ascension show his true glory and majesty as best we can explain in the Nicene Creed as 'Light of Light'. As Luke says in verse 51 (Chapter 9) 'he made up his mind to go to Jerusalem'. For Jesus this was making up mind time, his turning point of no return.

If that was all of the context and decision making, then what are Moses and Elijah doing popping up, coming from different eras of Jewish history? The most common reason given by commentators is that they were representatives, Moses of the law and Elijah of the prophets. Their concurrent existence in the transfiguration is a mystery, perhaps representing not just historical links with Jewish scriptures but also with other forms of life. You could consider the transfiguration as an event where past, present and future come together at one earthly time

point; it's when we, in the present, have a glimpse of Jesus' future glory. Paul brings these themes together in his letter to the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 3 v11) when he says that 'the law was given with a glory that faded away'...how much greater is the glory that belongs to the activity of the Spirit ...'because it will never fade away.' He then explains that the idea of covering up the face is similar to covering up your mind and it is only when Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit come into your life that changes occur, you no longer have to present a 'veil' to hide behind and they will more and more shine in you so that you will be free to show an undiminished glory. Paul goes further and explains this freedom from a cover-up a bit more. He says that it will enable us to 'feel like speaking freely'. To me the idea of glory being related to speaking freely is odd, yet much of what we do as humans is to communicate with others, maybe not directly by looking at someone's face but through language and behaviour. One description of Jesus that John – the same person as John in the transfiguration - uses frequently is the 'Word'; John writes, 'The Word became a human being and lived here with us. We saw his true glory, the glory of the only Son of the Father, from him all the kindness and all the truth of God have come to us' (John 1 v14). In the gospel of John, this seems to be the only time when John mentions him seeing the glory of Jesus and he speaks freely of it. For Peter, one of the other disciples to witness the transfiguration, the letter of Peter writes that the death of Jesus was no tragedy (1 Peter 1 v22) because the resurrection and ascension of Jesus brought him God's glory and this is the reason that we, the readers, can have hope and faith in God who is never ending. You can hear the story echo through the generations until now.

That brings us to Elijah the representative of the prophets. In the times before Jesus was born, prophets had kept the Jews in contact with God and had spoken of a future saviour to lead and bring humans into a right relationship with God. So why was Elijah recognised in this event and not some other person, some other prophet? There are many discussions on this topic, but the most plausible to me is based on a few verses before the transfiguration when Jesus asked his disciples 'what do people say about me?' (verse 18) and the disciples replied 'some say that you are John the Baptist or Elijah...' (verse 19). Not more than a few days later the transfiguration of Jesus stood as revealing the true nature of Jesus not as man but as God, unlike Elijah and Moses who were godly men. This recognition of Elijah enabled a real comparison between these key Old Testament men and Jesus Christ, Son of God. In our own life comparisons between Jesus and ourselves could be discounted because of cultural and other differences, yet here we have Moses and Elijah from dissimilar eras, centuries apart, being measured up against Jesus. Almost in the background, Peter having looked foolish, are the disciples who have been taken on this extraordinary awayday by Jesus into an experience that will challenge their perceptions which had been based on the Old Testament scriptures, the Law and the Prophets. Jesus had turned their theoretical knowledge of him into real practicalities. It was a time of insight, not unlike cognitive behavioural therapy where internal fears are voiced and healed. 'Who do you say I am?' Jesus had asked them and provided the answer. Now he was able to move on to Jerusalem with confidence in his friends.

Moving forward with confidence in Jesus Christ is also our calling. For Jesus he knew crucifixion was part of the deal. I have met many people who have faced death and a few stand out who had faith in the eternal nature of a loving God that was visible. One woman who had a so-called 'open and shut' surgery, that is her cancer was inoperable had a few weeks to live so I visited her during her recovery to find out what she was looking forward to. 'Oh!' she said 'I just have to wear all the things I love and give the rest away'. Her freedom was being able to enjoy the goodness in life and not worry about the future. Another man who faced an operation with a high death rate while I put him to sleep said to me, 'I have said my prayers, I am ready'. For me

God is revealed in everyday life, not just in flashes of glory, and I find it pertinent that the disciples had to come back down the mountain. The awayday finished.

But, after most awaydays I have participated in there is the inevitable tick box exercise, the feedback form with ratings of the context and content. Was it a brilliant venue? Were the speakers brilliant? Was time in group activities brilliant? Well three quarters of the folk went to sleep, hospitality was poor, the actors were not real, the lighting and acoustics were weird, and there was no fun or games. But we found out what Jesus was all about. We met his Father and we know that Jesus' plans to go to Jerusalem will have eternal consequences for us all.

Has Jesus' life, death, resurrection and ascension changed your life? We have no greater gift. It does not come in a 'goody bag' that my grandchildren so eagerly look forward to at the end of parties; it comes in the shape of a real life person whose presence through the Holy Spirit can transform our life from brokenness and despair to wholeness and joy. On this last Sunday before Lent we have a glimpse into who Jesus is for us. In the sacrament of Holy Communion we share the promise of glory.

Dr Anita Oji MD
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