

“Up on the diving board” a sermon for Transfiguration Sunday based on Matthew 17:1-9 preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Presbyterian Church Dunedin New Zealand on 23 February 2020.

Today is bright Sunday, transfiguration Sunday, the last Sunday of Epiphany. At the beginning of Epiphany the star shone over the baby Jesus, guiding the magi. A little later in Epiphany we remembered his baptism and we heard the words “This is my Son, the beloved, and with whom I am well pleased.” Over the last weeks we have heard Matthew’s account of some of the teaching of Jesus, especially over the last three weeks when Jesus was up a hill, and we heard the beatitudes, then last Sunday Jesus teaching about the law. And today, 14 chapters later, nearer the end of Matthew, we are up a higher mountain, and we hear the same words – “This is my Son, the beloved, with him I am well pleased.” But with three words added on ... Listen to him.

But this week the tone shifts sharply. Tuesday is fat Tuesday, Shrove Tuesday, the end of Epiphany, when we eat pancakes to use up all the eggs of abundance. Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent, when we bury the alleluias, we begin to name darkness and we are reminded that we are dust, creaturely beings. Then we are in the season of Lent, the journey to Good Friday and Easter Sunday, the journey to crucifixion and resurrection. Today though is bright Sunday, transfiguration Sunday. And I have an image - a diving board. We have climbed to a high place, over the weeks of the teaching of Jesus, steadily climbing, but then Jesus takes us higher still, high up, on the mountain, on the board, and why? Well because over the next weeks we plunge into what is underneath us, underneath what is going on, we are plunged deep into the human experience, deep into darkness, so deep indeed that we get to the very heart of evil, to a cross. It is a long way down and Christ goes there, so deep that he even punctures the power of evil. Christ brings us to this mountain, high up, because of how deep he is going to plunge us.

Peter struggles to comprehend the height and depth. Now Peter has been with Jesus, seeing the healing, noticing the restoring, hearing the teaching, watching the including, sensing embodied justice. Perhaps he seemed that this was it, that this would continue. That Jesus would carry on with his ministry

and this was all he needed to do. But Jesus has a sense that the trajectory of his ministry brings him into conflict with the powers, that he has to confront and wrestle with the very power of evil, the power that keeps people down, that drowns us, to rescue more than those with whom he related, to disempower evil.

Peter does not yet know that. So a few verses before today's story, when Jesus predicts his suffering and killing and resurrection, Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes him. You can hear Peter thinking - Why would a venture so seemingly effective come to an end? Why would you, Jesus, throw cold water when so many people are being helped? And Jesus angrily responds. "Get behind him Satan!; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." There is more here Peter than you realise. Jesus then speaks about discipleship. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

How can Peter gain a sense of the depth of what is happening, what is really going on in the ministry of Jesus? So six days after this experience, Jesus led Peter and James and John up a high mountain, by themselves. And there was the law embodied in Moses, and prophecy embodied in Elijah, this is what is driving Jesus. This is the faith giving him purpose. But more than that, there is the glow of divinity. Jesus is taking them beyond what they had already experienced, because they are about to start plunging.

I've noticed that there are people who seem to grow gradually in discipleship, over time, with prompts here and there, with ups and downs, steadily evolving as followers. But some of us don't. We have to be jolted to the depth of what Jesus is wanting to do with us in our world, surprised by glory. Jesus was being realistic up the mountain as he sensed the powers that swirl around, the forces that gather on the horizon, the entrenched ones who whisper behind the scenes, the gathering darkness. There was about to be a wrestling, a struggling, a wrenching, a suffering and torture and betrayal and death and resurrection, and Peter was going to be in the midst of it, right in the middle when everything seemed to come crashing down. So Jesus took him up a mountain.

Peter wanted to build three dwellings for Jesus and Elijah and Moses. Maybe he was honouring heroes or stretching the moment or preserving their influence. To face the depth of humanity, we need history and heroes, yes. We also need also a present power, a living voice, the constant whisper in our ear. "Get up and do not be afraid."

We know Syria and South Sudan, domestic violence and tragic deaths, unending inequality and the intractability of destructive forces. Jesus wants us to be part of the divine movement that punctured evil, to receive the spirit who takes us into life's deepest challenges, with hope.

Malcolm Guite wrote a poem looking back from the mountain of crucifixion, the blackened sky, to the mount of transfiguration, to the love glimpsed there that can never be eclipsed,

For that one moment, 'in and out of time',
On that one mountain where all moments meet,
The daily veil that covers the sublime
In darkling glass fell dazzled at his feet.
There were no angels full of eyes and wings
Just living glory full of truth and grace.
The Love that dances at the heart of things
Shone out upon us from a human face
And to that light the light in us leaped up,
We felt it quicken somewhere deep within,
A sudden blaze of long-extinguished hope
Trembled and tingled through the tender skin.
Nor can this this blackened sky, this darkened scar
Eclipse that glimpse of how things really are.

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*Captivated by the vision of the realm of God,
made known in Jesus, given in grace*



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