St Peter the Fisherman – Whitianga
August 6th 2017

Theme: Jesus’ Transfiguration

E te Atua aroha, e te Atua atawhai, kia whakapainga koe.
(God of love, God of grace, we give you thanks).

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Every group of Biblical Texts provides a challenge to the Preacher. One of the greatest of these is preaching on Transfiguration Sunday, and trying to explain what the Transfiguration means.

Seriously? When has the idea of a brilliantly glowing holy figure ever “made sense,” anyway? There are heaps of things in our world that we have failed to figure out. Why moths only fly around at night and are constantly drawn to a light or a flame, is an example.

The transfigured Jesus isn’t supposed to be figured out. He’s supposed to be appreciated. We should be drawn to him, as if **we** were moths drawn to the light.

However, since we humans are always seeking to unravel or pick apart these mysteries, here are a couple of ways the puzzle might be approached.

(The Transfiguration)

The Transfiguration has many of the elements of the story of a superhero. There’s an arduous trek up a mountain; a tightly knit company of friends on a “mission” together; the appearance of other-worldly figures in dazzling light; the transformation of the hero into an equally dazzling figure; a command from a powerful voice from another dimension; a determined descent to battle those other powers back home.

So, The Transfiguration can be thought of as a dramatic kind of a God revealing. Jesus becomes a beacon, like a lighthouse planted in the middle of the sea, a 1st Century superhero. The heavenly voice addresses all the witnesses: Peter, James, and John. “This is my Son, the beloved; listen to him”.

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I think God is still doing that with us, and frequently I suspect we aren’t doing what we are asked. On this Sunday, there is a real ‘in your face’ promise that Jesus can and will be noticed. Epiphanies aren’t always subtle. For those of you who are fans of Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings Saga, there was a mighty big one there when Gandalf the Grey was dramatically turned into Gandalf the White.

(Gandalf grey and white)

There are two primary differences between Gandalf the Grey and Gandalf the White. The first is power and the second is wisdom. Gandalf the Grey had limited power and was killed by the Balrog when he sacrificed himself to save Frodo and the rest of the Company. They believed he had gone from them forever and were devastated at their loss.

However, he was resurrected and transfigured into Gandalf the White who had full power at his disposal as an immortal, divine spirit., As Gandalf the White, he speaks with greater confidence and authority. He no longer has self-doubt and is clear about his mission. When he reappears, resurrected and transfigured, Tolkien is clearly displaying him as a Jesus figure. Gandalf the Grey vs. Gandalf the White are closely analogous to Jesus before and after the Transfiguration, and, more importantly, before and after the Resurrection.

(Jesus transfigured and resurrected)

Like Gandalf, Jesus’ transfiguration was **also** a complete change of his form and appearance, a metamorphosis that was dazzling in its brightness. Brighter than the light of the sun, revealing his true glory to the three disciples he had brought up the mountain with him.

Secondly, the sights and sounds of the Transfiguration also suggest that Peter, James, and John found themselves on holy ground, in privileged company. After all, Jesus appears alongside Moses and Elijah, the two greatest prophets in Jewish memories. Many things made those two ancient prophets great. For one thing, in the Bible each shares a moment of striking intimacy with God.

(Moses and Elijah)

Moses had a number of face-to-face chats with God. Then Elijah encounters God on Mount Horeb not in earthquake, wind or fire, but in the sound of sheer silence - what we would call “the still small voice.”

(The transfiguration)

At the Transfiguration, then, Jesus stands in impressive company, sharing that moment with two others who know what it is to share close communion with God and to frustrate that boundary between life and death. Also, here we have another example of multiple witnesses to a major event in Jesus’ time on earth. We know this is more than just a vision Peter might have had, by the fact John and James were there too. Three of them, and three of God’s greatest, seen together – Moses, Isaiah, and Jesus.

One of my favourite moments in today’s text, is when Peter, who was probably completely gobsmacked by what he, James and John were witnessing, offers to make nice dwellings for each of the three prophets. It isn’t a stretch to imagine him there – one minute the pretty rough and ready fisherman hanging out with his new mate, the next in the company of a King and a couple of hugely highly-placed Lord companions. His brain goes dead, no brilliant words emanate from his mouth, and all he can manage is his equivalent of our ‘how about I make you a cup of tea?’ – “how about we just build you three little dwellings, one for each of you?” Pity he hadn’t met Mary Poppins, as this was truly a ‘Supercalifragilistic expealidocius’ moment.

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Putting all this together, we have a story that reassures Jesus’ core disciples and Mark’s readers:  Jesus’ predictions of betrayal, death, and resurrection are to be trusted. The struggles yet to come for Jesus should in no way diminish confidence in his promises or his predictions of resurrection. As Mark’s gospel drives toward the bitterness of the passion, this story itself shines as a beacon of hope.

At the time of the Transfiguration, Jesus' earthly ministry was coming to a close. He had acknowledged that He was the Messiah and had predicted His death and resurrection. Now He was to reveal His divine glory to a select few of his followers. His Transfiguration was as clear an example as his baptism, that he was God’s chosen, and was being given both power and wisdom that will see him safely through the trials he is about to undertake.

All three of the Synoptic Gospel writers, in almost identical words, wrote about the experience of the Transfiguration. This clearly affirms the importance of the event. It is meant to point forward to the sufferings Jesus is about to experience but overcome. It is also meant to strengthen the disciples’ faith, revealing to them in a powerful way, the divine hand that is at work in the challenges Jesus will face and undergo. He would leave this world at his crucifixion, and be returned to it, glorified, as a result of his resurrection.

(Gandalf and the disciples)

The Hobbits, as they saw Gandalf the Grey taken to his death by the Balrog, were like the disciples at Jesus’ crucifixion. They did not know he would return to them transformed and immortal. They thought, as did the disciples, that they had lost Gandalf forever, and they would have to continue their perilous journey without his guidance and protection. Much the same as the disciples felt after they had taken Jesus down from the cross and buried him.
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The bright light of the Transfiguration affirms life, a light that shines ahead into Lent to keep that season in perspective, never without hope and confidence. We are encouraged to let go of the baggage that ties us down to the past, and travel lightly towards the promise at the end of Lent.

The Transfiguration was a special event in which God allowed certain apostles to have a privileged spiritual experience that was intended to strengthen their faith for the challenges they would later endure. It was designed to help them believe that Jesus was indeed immortal and would rise from the death facing him, full of God’s glory.

God’s revelation to His people in that event was a demonstration of His love and His grace for them. It is still relevant to us over 2,000 years later. Every time we remember the event of Jesus’ Transfiguration, we should also remember God is confirming to us that Jesus is our Lord; that our faith is not in vain, that we need not live in fear, but that we should live by faith in Him. A revelation of this kind provides us with another word from God about the hope of glory that lies ahead of us, no matter what we have to endure here on earth. Only in Christ is there any hope of passing beyond the grave to glory.

(Gandalf and Jesus)

As Gandalf the white returned to the Hobbits with no limitations on his power and stayed with them right to the successful completion of their mission, so Jesus the Transfigured has returned to us, with no limitations on **His** power, and will stay with us right through to the completion of our missions here in this life. That is why we remember and acknowledge the importance of this day.

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Whakapainga te Atua: **Thanks be to God**