

Sermon for Romsey and Lancefield

22nd of February 2009

Mark 9:2-9

“As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.”

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you, O LORD, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Today is a day of mourning. All over the country Australians are being asked to remember the people killed by the recent bushfires, the lives shattered, the towns destroyed. At the same time, today is a day of celebration in the church, as we commemorate the Feast of the Transfiguration. And yet the two events, the mourning and the celebration, aren't in opposition with each other. The celebration of the revelation of Jesus on the mountain can comfort us as we mourn, because the glorious Son of God revealed in the transfiguration is also the suffering Son of Man who enters into all the pain of the world on the cross.

Today's reading from Mark is the turning point of that gospel. Jesus and the disciples are on the road to Jerusalem. Looking back over 2000 years, we know where that road leads; to Jesus' betrayal and death. The disciples, too, are beginning to get a hint of how this journey will end. Immediately before today's reading, we're told that Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” and that Peter answered, “You are the Messiah.”¹ “Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.”² When Peter protested, Jesus told him: “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”³ This is the context within which the transfiguration takes place.

The transfiguration is a theophany, a revelation of God. In the transfiguration the separation of earth from heaven is overcome by the presence of Jesus. Mark's first readers would have recognised the heavenly nature of this event from the way Mark uses elements from the Old Testament. The transfiguration takes place on a mountain, the traditional site of revelations of God; the place on earth closest to heaven. Mark tells us that the transfiguration takes place ‘six days later’, referring back to the six days that Moses spent on Mount Sinai in the presence of the Lord before the Lord called to him. Jesus' clothes become dazzling white. They're the colour of light itself; such shining garments indicating that the person wearing them is an angelic figure, a messenger from heaven. The cloud that overshadows the mountain symbolises the divine presence, and God speaks from the cloud to the disciples on this mountain as God spoke from the cloud to Moses on Mount Sinai. Mark's first readers would have had no doubt that what he is describing here is an encounter with God.

The presence of Elijah and Moses also indicates that this is a scene set on the border between heaven and earth. God spoke to both Elijah and Moses on a mountain;⁴ their presence confirms for Peter, James and John that here on this mountain they are also encountering God. Jews considered both Elijah and Moses to be alive in the presence of God, part of the company of heaven. As today's Old Testament reading shows, it was believed that Elijah had never died, but had been swept up to heaven by a chariot and horses of fire.⁵ At the time that Mark was writing; many people believed that Moses had similarly been taken up to

¹ Mark 8:29.

² Mark 8:31.

³ Mark 8:32.

⁴ Exodus 24:17, 1 Kings 19:11-13.

⁵ 2 Kings 2:1-11.

God's presence alive; because although Moses' death was recorded in Deuteronomy, his burial place was unknown.⁶

So, every part of this story tells us, as it told Mark's first readers, that in Jesus' transfiguration the separation between heaven and earth has been overcome, that a revelation of God is occurring, and that in Jesus the veil that normally hides the Immortal, Invisible One from human sight has been removed. In the transfigured Jesus, we see God.

Peter is so overwhelmed by this that, as seems common with him, he blurts out the first thing in his head: 'Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.'⁷ Peter seems to want to hold on to the transfiguration experience. Jesus has already told the disciples that he must suffer and die, and Peter has already protested and been rebuked. Despite this, Peter still wants to experience the glory while avoiding the suffering. He needs to learn, as we all do, that we can't spend all our time on the mountain top.

Jesus' uniqueness is now revealed to the disciples. A cloud overshadows the mountain, and from the cloud a voice declares, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!' When the disciples look around Elijah and Moses have gone, and only Jesus remains. Jesus is not merely a prophetic figure or a teacher of the law. Jesus is not the equal of Elijah and Moses, Jesus is God's Beloved Son; what is happening here on the mountain is a revelation of God.

Jesus is greater than Elijah and Moses, but he will enter his glory through suffering and death. Elijah and Moses escaped death altogether, but God's Beloved Son will undergo betrayal, rejection, and abandonment by the Father as he dies at the hands of his enemies. This is the teaching that Jesus has been giving; the teaching confirmed by Jesus' Father when he orders the disciples to listen to Jesus. There cannot be resurrection without crucifixion; there cannot be glory without suffering.

As they leave the mountain, Jesus warns Peter, James and John to say nothing of what they had seen until after the Son of Man has risen from the dead.⁸ The story of the transfiguration cannot be told without the story of the cross. Even for the disciples who have now seen Jesus' glory revealed, there's no way of understanding who Jesus is until they have seen him suffer, die and rise again. Glory and suffering cannot be separated.

This is the paradox of our faith; the apparent contradiction at the core of Christianity. If we aren't willing to live with this paradox, if we try to solve it, we fall into one of two traps. We can ignore the suffering, crucified Jesus and focus on the glorious, Beloved Son. We can emphasise the resurrection at the expense of the crucifixion. It can lead us to believe that God is only with us when we are happy and well. This is the mistake made by the pastor who suggested that the bushfires are a sign that God has withdrawn his protection from Victoria.⁹ The God who suffered death on a cross is with humanity in all our pain and suffering. The transfiguration reveals that Jesus is the glorious, beloved Son of God; the crucifixion reveals that this glorious, beloved Son of God is intimately close to all those who mourn.

On the other hand, we can ignore the glorious, Beloved Son, the Jesus revealed in the transfiguration, and focus on the suffering, crucified Jesus. We can emphasise the crucifixion at the expense of the resurrection. We can see life as nothing but hard struggle, forgetting that

⁶ Deut 34:5-8.

⁷ Mark 9:5.

⁸ Mark 9:9.

⁹ <http://www.smh.com.au/national/pastors-abortion-dream-inflames-bushfire-tragedy-20090210-832f.html>

Jesus came to give us life in abundance! We might not be ready to celebrate this on this day of mourning, but it is part of the truth we proclaim. God is with us in joy and new life as well as in sorrow and death. And death is not the end, not the ultimate victor, because crucifixion is followed by resurrection.

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Transfiguration, the revelation of the glory of God in Jesus Christ. It is a mountain-top experience. But as we read of Jesus and the disciples returning from the mountain we know that this experience will be followed by death. Over the next seven weeks, starting with Ash Wednesday, we will accompany Jesus on his journey towards the cross. To some small extent we will deny ourselves and take up our cross by giving up luxuries during the forty days of Lent. At the end of this journey we will grieve the crucifixion and then celebrate the resurrection over a weekend of pain and joy. We will hold these together; see God in both the Beloved Son revealed in heavenly glory and beauty on the mountain and after the resurrection, and the suffering Son of Man dying in desolation on the cross.

And because God is revealed in both, we know that whether we're experiencing joy or sorrow, whether we're in triumph or despair, whether our lives are glorious or full of suffering, God in Jesus Christ is with us. Today is a Day of Mourning and a feast of celebration. God is with us in both. Amen.