



Praise Prayer Preaching

In search of the summit

Sermon transcript

Luke 9:28-43

According to Luke's Gospel, the Transfiguration occurs eight days after Jesus issued his call to his disciples to take up their cross and follow him. It is also important to note that it is found in the context of prayer. Some have suggested that it happened at night, but there is no doubt that this profoundly spiritual account is of greater importance than merely the devotional – for it helps us to understand the mission of Jesus Christ in its wider setting and what that has to say to us today.

The Lord takes an inner circle of three of his disciples and, while he was at prayer, “the appearance of his face changed”. The glory of Jesus Christ shines through this story, illuminating and highlighting his spiritual nature and his willingness to share his mission with those close to him. Though this is not the only point, it clearly has much to say to us. A key word has to be “metamorphoo” which is translated “transfigured” or simply “changed”.

Jesus and this small inner-circle of disciples climbed the mountain and, in doing so, offers a challenge to us all. We are called both individually and as a community of faith and service at Wesley Mission to reach for whatever summit lies before us. This is not a call for us to become the Bear Grylls of our community, though incidentally his Christian discipleship is outstanding; it is a call for us all to reach beyond our present place into the place of future challenge.

At Wesley Mission, as 2016 opens up before us, we recognise:-

- The changing social, political and religious culture
- The marginalisation of God in a secular context
- The danger of being satisfied with less than the best

What does this account from the gospel have to say to us at the beginning of this new year? It would seem to me that the transfiguration of Jesus bears witness to his greater redemptive mission. Put rather more simply, in the face of suffering, rejection and even death, Jesus remains resolute as he moves towards his high calling, which we see demonstrated in the cross and resurrection.

If we were sitting in smaller groups representing the wide range of activities that we focus upon at Wesley Mission, we could helpfully explore some of the possible obstacles, hindrances and difficulties which we must address if we are to reach the summit to which God has called us in faith and service.

Bishop William Willimon tells the endearing story of a friend who was a minister in the African-American church. His friend shared with him the protracted and cruel journey to obtain civil rights. He commented how it did not take long for the concern and activity of white liberals to run out of steam. Some high-minded and sensitive activists came from the North to Mississippi and were perplexed at the approach being taken.



The first thing Martin Luther King and his cohorts did was to gather in some hot, small, crowded Black Baptist church and they sang and prayed and sang some more. Many of the visitors thought “Well, that’s fine, if you like that sort of thing!” I suspect they thought, “What has all this interminable preaching and praying got to do with the actual business of gaining real rights?”

Willimon records the words of his friend, “You see, we Black folk have been at this thing longer than you White people. We knew that 200 years of evil wouldn’t be eradicated in one march to Jackson.”

It was the preaching and the prayers that maintained them in the midst of the battle. They withdrew for worship so that they might return with renewed perseverance and vision.

One of my summer films this year was Suffragette which tells of the hard battle for the equal rights for women in Britain. The examples of New Zealand and Australia on the issue of women’s suffrage led the way, but it took rather longer and was far more complex in Britain because of the stuffy establishment of Westminster. There are countless examples telling us that if we are to reach the summit of our objectives we must be engaged in the fullest sense, whatever the impediments might be, but also equipped for the journey.

This passage comes on the Sunday before we begin the Christian season of Lent, as Christians reflect upon the weary road which leads to the cross. This account speaks of withdrawal and return, which is a dynamic that we observe throughout the gospels.

This is an inner-dynamic of the Christian life and therefore highly appropriate that we begin our year in the context of worship. Jesus leads his disciples up to “a high mountain”. In scripture, everyone from Moses on knows that this is the best place to receive vision and empowerment to face whatever lies ahead. Cloud signifies the presence of God and a voice speaks of God’s affirmation of Jesus.

The mountaintop experience occurs on the way to the cross. Though the gospels don’t give us all the details of Jesus’ ministry, there is no doubt that the pace quickens and the end of the drama will quickly come into view.

The spirituality we observe in the transfiguration is not an escape from reality; it is quite the opposite, for withdrawal on the mountain is necessary in order to return to the challenge of life for both Jesus and his disciples.

We all need times of withdrawal, vision and renewal. Consider the relationship between our Christian discipleship and the call to engage in a missional purpose which is expressed in practical deeds and service. There can be no dividing of our mission from its source of strength and power.

Moses and Elijah appear in the vision, representing the Law and the Prophets. The cloud of God’s presence envelopes them and they hear a voice telling them that Jesus is the One they should listen to. When the vision presented itself to the disciples, they remained mute, failing to understand its meaning.

The dangers of the seeking of the summit have been all too vividly demonstrated in recent days in a similar challenge that Henry Worsley took up in relation to the Antarctic, which only recently ended in tragedy.



In early May 1996, 31 climbers on Mount Everest were suddenly trapped by a ferocious storm. Eight of them lost their lives, the highest number of casualties for a single day on the mountain. In Patrick Myers' play K2, a marooned climber on the Himalayan peak that gives the play its name voices this line, "Mountains are metaphors."

Mountains are metaphors for testing, for seeking and, most significant of all, for vision. Jesus took Peter, James and John on a trek up the mountain to confirm a vision for his life. But those like Jesus who seek the summit, put their very lives at risk. Seeking the summit would mean death for Jesus and, likewise, for many of his apostles. If we would go with Jesus to the summit, we must be willing to die for him. We read the words of Jesus in the earlier verse, "For those who want to save their life will lose it, but those who lose their life for me will save it." (9:24)

Seeking the summit signifies a quest to be all that we can be, despite the number of life's varying risks that involves.

The transfiguration is told by Matthew, Mark and Luke with an almost equal amount of detail.

All the passages connect or make a link to Jesus' questioning the disciples' perception of him. Peter stands out from the rest and makes his memorable confession and yet is warned not to tell anyone about this.

Let us look a little closer at the message and what it has to say to us:-

Transformation power has a spiritual focus

Jesus is facing a critical decision. If we take a serious analysis of the humanity of Jesus, he is asking himself questions about the direction he must take regarding Jerusalem. At the end of his journey to Jerusalem, there is a cross and a brutal crucifixion.

It should not surprise us that Jesus chooses to pray, but how often, for us, prayer is the last resort rather than the first priority. In a recent pastoral context, I heard someone say, "Well, at least I can pray." In point of fact, we can first and foremost pray.

One writer described prayer as an invitation home. He placed prayer as a different approach to noise, hurry and crowds, to push and shove and to frustration, fear and intimidation.

Richard Foster continues, "We do not need to be shy. He invites us into the living room of his heart where we can put on old slippers and share freely. He invites us into the kitchen of his friendship where we chatter and mix batter in good fun. He invites us into the dining room of his strength where we can feast to our heart's delight. He invites us into the study of his wisdom where we can learn, grow, stretch, and ask all the questions we want. He invites us into the workshop of his creativity where we can be co-labourers with him, working together on the outcome of events. He invites us into the bedroom of his rest where new peace is found and we can be vulnerable and free."

It is only as we understand the reality of spiritual transformation being related to our daily lives and, as an organisation, to our future challenges, that we will fully grasp all that God has to offer to us.



At Caesarea Philippi, Jesus announced to a small group of disciples that they would be going to Jerusalem and there he will offer up his life as he is rejected. Peter was swift to protest by taking Jesus to one side and saying, as recorded by Matthew, “Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you!” (Matthew 16:22). But Jesus interrupted him. That’s how the meeting ended.

For the next eight days, it must have been terrible. Their relationships would be cool and distant. They ate meals together and went about their usual daily activities until Jesus interrupted the silence to take them up the mountainside.

As we encounter such moments, they impact upon our lives and our direction.

Visions come to those who are awake

The transfiguration, like so many difficult passages, has multiple layers of meaning. The fact that the disciples are asleep has something to say to us. Here in Luke’s account Jesus prayed as the disciples had fallen asleep.

It always seems to happen at the wrong moment. After a long day’s work you might choose to catch up on a program on television and you try to relax, so much so that you open your eyes and you have missed the critical part. Modern technology is now available so that this no longer presents a problem. However, for the disciples this was serious.

With their head in the clouds they drifted into a place where they could not grasp the power of the moment. Remember the story of Rip Van Winkle. He fell asleep one day in a quiet spot on the banks of the Hudson River and he didn’t wake up for twenty years. When he went to sleep the sign above his favourite hotel read “King George III, King of England”. He was a subject of the British crown. When he woke up, King George had been replaced by George Washington and Rip was now an American citizen. He had slept and snored through a revolution.

It is possible to be oblivious to what is happening around us. This is what happened to the disciples. We must not be too critical of them because it is possible to be preoccupied and become prisoners of our own world of trivialities.

We now have eight grandchildren and they are all young, not one older than six, and early in the year we were able to be together, which is a rare occasion. Grandad is always interested to see the latest puzzles and games that they play with. I continue to be fascinated by the picture puzzles where the children search for animals or objects. You do, however, have to know what to look for or you won’t see it. The eye is just an instrument. The vision is the gift.

We must be alert on many fronts:-

- To and for new opportunities that arise
- To take up new responsibilities given to us
- To discover new ways of working together

We must be awake and alert and avoid missing the most important things.



The danger that lies in the journey

Luke's account of the transfiguration makes an additional point. Though the disciples saw the transfiguration, their translation of this experience provided less than satisfactory results.

Raphael was one of the great Christian artists. He only lived to the age of 37 and his final painting, which was unfinished, was the Transfiguration. It shows Jesus Christ in all his glory on the mountainside, together with the disciples. At the foot of the painting is the scene that follows, depicting the disciples' inability to help a sick boy. The link between Jesus' glory and the disciples' failure is a remarkable acknowledgement on behalf of the artist.

The disciples failed miserably in their efforts to bring healing and wholeness to a child. They failed to bring reconciliation and peace between an anguished father and his only son (v.v.37-43). I suppose the question is, "Did the disciples simply fail to grasp just who Jesus is? Did they lack requisite trust in the power of God? Was their difficulty one of embodying the gospel of Word and deed?"

There are many warnings to those of us who seek to follow closely. If we are to be formed in the presence of God as a community of faith and service, we must remain with him at one with his mission in the world.

If Peter had any doubts about whether Jesus was the Messiah or not, the mountainside would help to dispel such feelings. But what followed was an experience of failure, rather than victory. The real challenge is what happens in the valley and how we tackle it.

Some years ago, a minister received a letter from a young mother who explained what had happened to her when she moved into a new sub-division of the city.

"We tried everything we could think of to make this place something other than a real estate development. We tried recreation, community picnics and organised dances. We formed a women's club, held bridge parties and started a gardening group. We had a parents' organisation and evening discussion groups. We tried everything, but it wasn't until the church came that we became not just a sub-division but a community and reached out as real neighbours to one another." We must be able to see what the Christian faith adds to our community life!

Mountaintop experiences help us to face the challenges that lie below. Fred Craddock told the story about the young minister, newly graduated from seminary, serving his very first church. He received a call from a church member, an older woman who was so weak she couldn't get out of bed and she wanted prayer.

All the way to the hospital he kept thinking about what he would say, what words of comfort he should give her. He arrived at the hospital, went to her room and they shared an uncomfortable few minutes. As he prepared to leave, he asked if she would like a prayer. She replied, "Yes, of course. That's why I wanted you to come." He then asked her what he should pray for. "Why, I want you to ask God to make me feel stronger."

Haltingly he fumbled over the words and, at the end of the prayer, the patient said "Amen" and got out of bed. Meanwhile the young minister, in a stupor stumbled to the stairwell, walked down five flights of stairs, found his car, looked up to heaven and said, "Don't you



ever do that to me again.” He had a mountaintop experience, but he didn’t know what to do with it.

At the beginning of a new year, we want to see our life and work in a new context, in a place of freshness and life, open to all that God is about to offer to us. Let us begin the year on the mountainside and with fresh enthusiasm to face whatever lies ahead.