

Transfiguration 14th Feb 2021

Mark 9:2-10

The revealing of things hidden

One modern way of thinking about what happened on the mountain, the transfiguration of Christ, is that it was a kind of religious experience. From a biblical perspective, it is revelation – a revelation of a deeper reality – something behind or beyond the physical world of normal perception. In this vision, the love and power of God shine in and through Jesus. Suddenly, almost literally, the ‘lights go on’ for the disciples. As in the Baptism of Christ in the Jordan where the heavens are opened, so here something breaks through....there is a glimpse into the eternal timeless reality of God.

On one level the story would remind the Jewish reader of another famous vision – to the prophet Daniel – a vision of God and a divinely appointed Messiah figure – one like a human being (Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14)

So this vision is a *breaking through* of something previously hidden. The disciples are getting a glimpse of God in Jesus....not through any effort of their own....in fact in the Gospels the disciples are typically portrayed as completely dim witted and blind - they seem to understand something and then in the next moment they completely don't get it at all.

This is probably why Jesus keeps telling people, particularly in Mark's gospel, to say nothing – to keep their mouths shut – because until the crucifixion and resurrection they simply will not fully get it. Anything they say is bound to be wrong. In Jesus the disciples are slowly learning to perceive something which didn't, on the face of it, look like what they expected of the Kingdom of God. They expected and wanted an immediate and powerful overturning of the existing political order. What they got was a humble Galilean peasant – just an ordinary human being.

But in this vision on the mountain top something far more than ordinary breaks through. NT Wright says that ‘The transfiguration is a sign of Jesus being entirely caught up in and bathed in the love and power of God’.

Moses and Elijah, symbolically representing the Law and the Prophets, are there on the mountain with them – for they have prepared the way for Jesus – and now Jesus is bringing the Kingdom to its culmination – a distinctive turning point in history.

The church will continue to witness to this Kingdom in its life and witness through the power of the Spirit.....but only AFTER the cross and resurrection....Jesus warns them not to go off half cocked – the disciples won't fully appreciate what's going on until after the cross. Living in the Kingdom is NOT going to be all sweetness and light.

One of the problems with this kind of story (and we could include resurrection stories, or of Paul's experience on the Damascus Road), is that we can dismiss the stories in two ways:

- a) it's written back after the event as a story construction to try to justify a later believe or
- b) it's some kind of mental delusion.

But I've been around long enough now to hear many stories of powerful religious spiritual experiences – of the parting of veils – of the perceiving of deeper realities, by people who are generally honest and mentally sane.

In fact, at the Alister Hardy Religious Experience research unit at the University of Wales there is a collection of at least 6000 thousand stories of religious experience from ordinary people, harvested over the years by researchers.

A friend of mine wrote his PhD on dreams as religious experience. Everyone dreams and visions can be thought of as dreams which occur while awake – the veil between the conscious and unconscious parts not while we are asleep but while we are awake.

I've had a couple of significant experiences over the years which I would describe at some kind of breakthrough when eternity seemed to be momentarily present within the realm of space and time. One was in my early 20's on a ship in the middle of the Indian Ocean looking up into an ink black sky filled with the Milky Way. Another was about 15 years ago, driving down Thomas St towards UWA to check out the Chaplaincy job at UWA. Winthrop Hall stood directly in front of me at the end of Thomas St and a spectacular rainbow was ending directly on top of Winthrop Hall.

Religious experiences are more common than not. But commonly we miss the significance. TS Elliot in one of his poems says that 'we had the experience but missed the meaning'. (*Four Quartets: The Dry Salvages*).

It is necessary to reapproach the experience in light of the meaning, but for disciples as for us, the meaning of this transfiguration would not be apprehended until the cross. In the transfiguration, where they glimpse the light of the glory of Christ, the disciples maybe had the problem of jumping too quickly to the meaning of the story and got it completely wrong because there could be no glory without the cross first (the author of John's gospel saw this particularly clearly). So Jesus asks them to sit with it a bit longer before talking to others. He says, 'don't tell anyone'

Not everything that might be called a religious experience is necessarily a *transformative* experience – and powerfully transformative experiences (like love or suffering) we might not name as religious experiences.

So Jesus advice to his disciples is wise: Wait for the cross and the resurrection – for the cross and resurrection will become, for the disciples (and therefore for the church) the lens for interpreting the meaning of all other experiences, helping us to discern if they come from God.

One question to be asked of any religious experience is – where it this leading me? Is it turning me into a more loving human being? It is resulting in a transformation of my mind and heart towards love?