

## TRANSFIGURATION SUNDAY

Nicky Ing - 4th April 2004

Genesis 22:1-18; Ps.116:11-16; Romans 8:31b-34; Luke 9:28-36

If we look carefully at what the Gospels tell us about the earthly life of Jesus, we will find that before every major decision, Jesus spent time alone in prayer. Usually he went to a high place, away from the crowds. There are many references in Luke's Gospel to Jesus praying, and the ways in which he taught his disciples to pray: understanding the importance of the relationship with the Father. After his baptism, Jesus prayed.....before he chose his twelve disciples, he prayed...he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane before his arrest and crucifixion...he prayed for forgiveness for those who nailed him to the Cross...and he prayed as he gave up his life, commending his spirit to the Father.....So here, at this point, he took Peter, James and John, his three closest disciples, and retreated to a high place to pray. It was a crucial moment in Jesus' public ministry...just before he was to approach Jerusalem, where he knew he would soon meet with a violent death. Now, Jesus needed strength for what lay ahead of him, he needed comfort and reassurance from his Father, and strength too, for the disciples who didn't yet understand.

For the people of Israel, the fullest communication and rule for living came from the body of literature they had come to recognise as the message of God contained in the Law (known as the Torah) and the Prophets...the story of their collective life with their saving God....that these laws taught how to live out the relationship.....and the lives and words of the powerful prophetic figures who called them back to the covenant, or the promise, whenever the people strayed. As human beings, we all long to receive messages which go beyond just information....we have a continuing search to find *meaning* in our lives....it is really the search for God....trying to find meaning. Such questions as 'Who are we?' ..... 'What is life about?' and 'What does it mean to do the right thing?' were answered in the Law and the Prophets...personified especially in the historical figures of Moses and Elijah....So the Transfiguration vision of today's Gospel is part of that same thread stretching back to early Old Testament times...Peter, James and John see Jesus' face and clothing changed into a dazzling radiance...and they see him in conversation with Moses and Elijah, who symbolise the Law and the Prophets....and then they are enveloped in a bright, overshadowing cloud...a reminder of the cloud from which God spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai...and God's voice, out of the cloud, now affirming that Jesus is His Beloved Son....the same message which was heard at the Baptism of Jesus...this experience on the mountain is an opportunity for the disciples, to glimpse the glory...the divine glory of the human Jesus....God is revealed in Jesus....and there is deep significance for them, in seeing Jesus, Moses and Elijah together....and in God's message, **'This is my Son, my Chosen...Listen to Him!'**

The response of Peter to this moment of glory might be similar to our own if we had been there. He wanted to stay on the mountain...he wanted to build a safe haven up there....to hold onto what he could see...to savour the moment. He is overwhelmed by the beauty and the brilliance....but the cloud overshadows them all and after the voice of God speaks we read in v.36: **'they kept silent....'** This was something too big to speak about: even the impetuous Peter realises that!.... and the disciples could

not fully understand...but the glimpse of Jesus' glory was given them so that later, **after** the Resurrection, they would understand.

How can we be transfigured? How can our lives glow and radiate the life and peace of God? These are questions we may want to ask today. We can indeed experience the light, peace, unity and joy which Jesus offers to us, and which gives meaning to our lives...For all of us, if we are open to receive, there are moments of grace...they can come to us in times of prayer, of quiet reflection, and in peaceful surroundings. Hopefully we can experience God through the liturgy and our worship together in Church. God can reveal God's self to us through the beauty of creation...our own Drakensberg and its peaks and valleys and clouds offers us amazing opportunities to experience the majesty of God...the beauty of the sea, the power of its changing tides and colours...the beauty of expression in poetry, music, painting... sculpture...the talent of sewing, making special clothes or toys for children whom we love, and the joy of giving...the joy in the face of a hungry child who receives an unexpected treat, or a home-cooked meal.....the thrill of discovery in a loving relationship...the joy of a new birth, (9am Joshua and Nicky have experienced this in the wonder of this new life in the person of little Georgia!) Then there are those sudden tear-filled moments in our lives when we just feel inexplicably overwhelmed by God's love...the excitement we feel when we see a flower opening in our garden when we have planted the seed...or the harvesting of home grown vegetables.... The blessing of forgiveness, offered and received...the healing skills of doctors, nurses...all who work to restore those who are sick...the gift of opportunity in praying with someone who is struggling with pain, or loss...the privilege of sharing these special moments of life with others...anniversaries, birthdays.....all the highs and the lows of life can be touched by the grace of God if we allow ourselves to recognise and respond ....We too can be transfigured by love...the things that excite us, move us, rouse our spirit within us....if we begin to understand that all of life as we experience it is a gift, and comes to us out of the amazing generosity of God.

But of course all of life is not the 'mountain-top' experience. Like Jesus, who led the disciples down from the mountain, and had to suffer before he could enter into his glory, we too may have to walk the road of suffering...the dark places in the valley of fear, and grief, and struggle...whether it be with illness, bereavement, financial stress, disappointment.....depression.....and the road can often seem long and hard and dark. The comfort for us is in the promise of Jesus that he is with us, even in those dark places where we feel we are in a thick cloud, and cannot see the way..we need to reach out our hands, to find him waiting there....and he is waiting to transform us with his love and his understanding, and his compassion. **(Story of A Sack Full of Wings by Ann Thurston):**

The poet Denise Levertov tells a story about her father as a little boy in Russia, seeing an old pedlar with a sack on his back. Her father never asked what was in the sack, he knew: it was full of wings, wings which would enable people to fly like birds.

**In Levertov's own work she imagines that we have wings, but they are invisible and because we do not use them, they drag in the mud and weigh us down. Life is simpler when we settle for a limited vision and even for the security of that dragging weight. 'She has her feet firmly on the ground,' we say in praise....or: 'He made a sensible decision,' we say of another who turns his back on risk. We**

are somewhat sceptical of the adventurer, we are a little in awe of the one who leaves everything to follow the prophet. Later on we find it difficult to recall that there might ever have been such a moment in our own lives, when we see an expression on the face of a child, not yet made cynical by the tawdry offerings of the false gods, or on the face of the wiser older one who retains a zest for life. But the invitation to move into the depths or take wing is in fact always there, always ahead of us.

When we take holidays, they can truly be Holy-Days when there is sacred time and space to entertain, however fleetingly, our dreams, to lift however clumsily our wings, to dare, however briefly, to fly.

The words of the Psalm were very beautiful this morning...(PS.116) *'What shall I return to the Lord for all his bounty to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord, I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people.'*

As we see the cup of salvation lifted up for us in the Eucharist in a few minutes, let us rejoice in the wonder of it and in the amazing gift to us of Jesus, God's own Son. Let us treasure the moments of light and grace which offer to transfigure us daily into his likeness, giving meaning and hope to our lives and to the lives of others. And may we go out into the world, where it is often dark, and let God's light radiate from us. May the message of the Transfiguration be an encouragement to us on our Lenten journey towards the light of Easter.

**Amen.**