

Transfiguration 2020, Matthew 17.1-9
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The things that are not trans-form the things that are

“God is the beyond in the midst of life.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

1. A unique transfiguration: ongoing Exodus in all of life

In our reading in Mark 9: 2-9, we find a unique Christian version of transfiguration in the story of the transfiguration Jesus.

Jesus takes Peter, James and John “up the mountain”. A symbol of a relationship into the heights of life, *the things that are not*, away from the distractions of the things that are, our social, cultural and personal constructions.

And this is the meaning of this transfiguration story: that within the life of the historical Jesus, heaven and earth mysteriously intersect.

As Bill Loader writes:

Heaven and earth meet in him (the space perspective); future and present meet in him (the time perspective), without dissolving the distinction between either... This is the Son: listen to him! The transfiguration is a celebration of who Jesus is.

Heaven and earth meet and what happens?

For Mark, this story is a disclosure of God’s will for society. Elijah and Moses both sought a just and free society for their own age and time.

They challenged rulers who threatened the well being of the people. Moses challenged the Jewish nation’s distortion of their agreement with God, and returned to the Mountain to rewrite their agreement with God. Elijah challenges King Ahab, who wants to kill him, so he retreats to Mount Sinai. But there, God sends him back to face the king; to keep working for the freedom of the political space of Jewish people against the abuse of power.

The voice of God has further profound meaning: This is my beloved Child, Listen to Him, speaks the voice of God hidden in the cloud – never seen or controlled by humanity. Listen to what: to the new message of love and justice, and suffering love. As in the baptism of Jesus, when the voice repeats this message of love and acceptance, we too are loved and valued.

2. Transfiguration and contradiction

We face the daunting reality of our struggle as followers of Jesus to be partners in the work transformation.

As Sr. Joan Chittister, a Benedictine nun and a social psychologist, remarked:

“In the story of the Transfiguration ... [the disciples experience the] unexpected and certainly the disturbing. ... [but] Peter ... opted for piety.

“Let’s settle down here, Jesus, and build three booths.”

...Peter ... was opting for a religion of temples, institutions and shrines. ... for a religion that transcends the world ... [for a] ...privatised religion.

“Real religion, the scripture insists,

is not about transcending life; real religion is about our transformation.

... Transfiguration means that the role of religion demands enlightenment.

The role of religion is to bring us to an awareness of life. The role of

religion is to transform the world, to come to see the world as God sees the world and to bring it as close to the vision of God as we possibly can.

Why? Scripture is very clear. What God changes, God changes through us.”

And when they descend into the valley, the disciples are powerless. They are unable to heal child who suffers from epilepsy. Later they do not understand Jesus’ teaching and quarrel over who is the greatest among them. We as the church can contradict our transfiguration encounters and our espoused vision to accompany the church in its exodus into appropriate mission in the world.

This event is an extraordinary moment in Jesus life, and in the life of the world, Mark suggests.

It is a frightening and overwhelming moment of his disciples. Peter wants to hold this moment, to create a religious monument out of it, to hope it will remain deep in their beings and accompany their reintegration back into daily life, where Jesus has told them he will face political abuse and death.

This is a necessary moment. It is a love story, wherein the compassionate God entering humanity on this mountain, showing in this event that things can be turned inside out. A Necessary love story because humanity, groups, individuals, roll from one moment of disempowerment to another, overwhelmed not by voices from clouds and faces shining like the sun, but by the abuse of political and personal power and desire.

3. The things that are not trans-form the things that are

In spaces of disempowerment, the unseen compassionate God, the future “beyond” always seeks to mysteriously dis-turb the normal.

In memories distant space, I remember a visual experience in my imagination in my early teens. It was one of those nights! Our two-bedroom fibro house, set on wooden stumps, with an attached kitchen area was asleep, rattled by the snoring of my intoxicated father in the undersized bedroom I shared with him. You see my war-shocked parents tried to make the best of life, but we lived and suffered within our dysfunctional family, and we considered it was normal.

This one night, as I again drowned in loneliness and despair, in my imagination I was transfigured within a really vivid mixed image: the chocking feeling that even if I travelled to the furthest planet I could never escape this suffering; but, alongside this moment, I was overwhelmed by the strong feeling-sense that I was held and supported by a great power, like being nestled in a great hand; and I felt safe and comforted.

The things that are not, such as this experience of planets and powerful sustenance, in my imagination, transformed the things that are, my loneliness, and despair.

This paradoxical combination of human despair and powerlessness together with this strong sense of being supported, has remained and has sustained me through my life in growing richness and new understanding, and which I now interpret as God’s loving, unseen presence within our suffering, within the suffering of the world. This was a personal inner response within the turbulence of family life.

INTO THE THINGS THAT ARE, my dysfunctional family life, enter THE THINGS THAT ARE NOT, the vision in my imagination, that transformed, sustained and enabled me to survive the pain and the suffering.

Transfiguring experiences are common to all human beings, cultures and religions. They empower, enlighten and even transform and sustain in different ways.

Conclusion

This unrepeatable, magnificent story functions as encouragement for faith and new forms of human power and interaction: the faith of a nation, of a group, of the individual.

It announces the presence of a new way of being: new power, new formation of social and cultural space for the freedom of all.

It creates the transvaluation of values: the turning of accepted values inside out: the hatred of an enemy is replaced with the practice of love.

It deals with the transformation of power: conflict between nations, groups or individuals is dealt with by negotiation instead of military might and economic power.

The transfiguration story and its revaluation of power and humanity, the turning of his heart inside out, encourages new values and practice.

Faith is about recognising that God is constantly seeking to work together with us in the practice of re-ordering and transfiguring power; transfiguring political life, social and cultural arrangements for the freedom and benefit of all. This is about the Radical following of Jesus. To be in step with the hidden, unseen future influencing the present, including our hearts, communities and our nation.

The transfiguration story and our transforming experience are only real if they lead us to partner with God in the continuing work of leading all people into Exodus where ever suffering and oppression shape human lives.

As Paul Lehmann writes in his book, *The Transfiguration of Politics*, God works mysteriously in transfiguration in human lives, cultures, societies and nations where ever human life is made more human. The things that are not transform the things that are.

Transfiguring moments are always surprising, out of our control, yet liberating and make human life more human.