

Sermon: The Transfiguration of Jesus

Sunday 3 March, Cashmere Presbyterian: Silvia Purdie

Exodus 34: 29-35

Luke 9: 28-36

Things were going well. Jesus was a rising star. Great crowds of people were coming to him. Those who were sick were being healed. The hungry were fed, even thousands at one time. Religious leaders and even political leaders were keen to hear what Jesus was saying and see what Jesus was doing.

And even more exciting was that Jesus was passing on his power and authority to his team. His disciples were going out and healing people in Jesus name and casting out evil spirits in his name and sharing good news ... and it was all very exciting. It was looking good for Team Jesus.

And then into this up-beat mood he drops a bomb-shell. He starts talking about death, as in, his own death. And not just any death, but a death of rejection and failure, a crucifixion death. He did also say that he would rise again on the 3rd day but I don't think his disciples heard that bit – you know how it is if you get bad news, you stop listening after the first bit, it's all too much to take in. And of course they didn't believe him. I guess they thought he was being melodramatic, or depressive, who knows what they thought ... but we do know that they did not like it.

Luke chapter 9 is a hinge, the early good news of Jesus' rise to fame and success as a healer and teacher turn here in chapter 9; from here on Jesus is walking towards Jerusalem, towards the cross.

It is appropriate that next week is the start of Lent. We begin our journey towards the cross. And the first week of Lent is an invitation to look death in the face. Ash Wednesday, which this coming Wednesday, is traditionally a moment to consider your own mortality. Not to be depressive, but because our faith teaches that death is part of life and that death is not the end. We do not live in fear of death, because Jesus himself did not fear death and Jesus himself broke its power over us.

So there are the disciples trying to absorb the shock of Jesus saying that he is going to die and is going to be rejected, which makes zero sense, and then Jesus says to his three closest friends,

“come on chaps”.

“Where are we going?” they ask

“Up” he says, and up they go. Away from the crowds, away from the hurt and puzzled disciples, away from the towns, away from fresh bread and good wine, away from comfy beds, up higher, up where there's nothing but rocks and sharp spiky plants clinging to the rocks, up where the sky is close, where clouds scuttle past at head height, and in the gaps in the clouds the land falls away, and through the dusty haze they could see bits of the lake.

Exhausting stuff. After the brilliance of the sunset, and the distant gleam of the setting sun catching the Mediterranean Sea, they slept, curled uncomfortably in hollows between the rocks with the stars so sharp overhead. Jesus did not sleep. He didn't seem to need much sleep. He prayed, and at some point in the night the disciples were dragged from deep sleep by the sound of voices. Voices and a strange light. Panic woke them. What? Who's there? Are we under attack?

No.

The first thing they realised was that the brilliant light was coming from Jesus himself. He was just shining, intense, hard to look at.

Not that Jesus seemed to notice. He was deep in conversation with two men, who he named as Elijah and Moses. It was all over too quickly, but Peter and James and John heard enough to be sure afterwards that Jesus and Elijah and Moses were talking about the same thing they had been talking about the day before the mountain climb – that Jesus would die, suffer and be rejected. But Elijah and Moses were not, like the disciples, trying to stop Jesus talking about it. They were nodding, affirming, talking about his death as something to be accomplished, achieved.

But really it was all over so fast, they were fading out and Jesus's brilliance was fading. And Peter, good old Action Man Peter, leaped up trying to grasp the moment and saying

“Don't go! Stop, Wait. Stay here with us. We'll build you huts. Don't go.”

But Jesus just smiled at Peter, and the moment was over, and the only light was the stars and the only sound was the sound of sheer silence, for mountain tops are very quiet places until the wind blows.

The gospels don't tell us what happened next. Your guess is as good as mine. I guess they got back to sleep eventually, maybe. They agreed to not speak of what had happened. I guess it didn't fit into the constraints of actual words. Not until Jesus rose from the dead.

Then, after that, Peter and James and John spoke of what happened that night on the mountain top. Because then, after Jesus appeared to them in his resurrected body, then they realised that this was the same Jesus who had shone like the sun on a mountain top. They knew then that he was one with God, and had been all along.

They had seen the face of God in Jesus, and lived.

Unlike poor Moses – he had seen only a glimpse of God's back, hidden in a crevice in the rock.

Like Moses they too had been terrified.

Like Moses they went down the mountain, back to reality, back to normality and the mess of human life with all its contradictions.

Seeing God, up there on the mountain, how do we make sense of that experience in the demands of everyday life? But they had seen God. Peter, James and John had seen the glory of the almighty creator God. In the person of Jesus. And yet they went down the hill with Jesus, back to reality, knowing absolutely that he was completely one with God, of one being with the Father, transcendent in glory, and yet at the same time he was still Jesus.

So, here's the thing. Here's the tough question. Knowing now that Jesus really was the Messiah, without any doubt, having seen him literally ablaze with God's power and glory, how could they then possibly accept that he could be rejected and killed?

They saw Jesus in glory; how could they possibly imagine Jesus in agony?

If Jesus was one with the Father, then Jesus could do anything, could achieve anything. Why would Jesus choose the way of the cross?

This stands at the heart of the Christian claim, this seeming contradiction, the crucified Christ. We who have been brought up with it are numb to the shocking jarring wrongness of the whole idea that Jesus would choose to die.

You have to feel sorry for the disciples trying to accept it, while knowing that he didn't have to.

As we embark this week on Lent we walk into this mystery: why did Jesus die on the cross? How could he have loved the world that much?

The vast glory and power of God, expressed in its clearest way on the cross.

The Christian faith embraces the heights and depths of human existence. The best and the worst that you can go through is wrapped around by Jesus choosing to die for you. Everything is rearranged around the cross. Every category is broken down. Every lie is exposed. Every act of violence is undermined.

God choosing sacrifice. Glory expressed in complete surrender.

This was the only way. This is the Jesus way.

It's what we call salvation: Jesus could have taken over the world, but instead he chose to die so that you might live.

On that mountaintop that night Peter James and John saw the glory of God in the face of Jesus. And they heard the voice of God declare Jesus as Son of God, Chosen and adored by the Father.

This Jesus gave his life for the world on the cross, and so God raised him from death, and sending out into the world the glory of Jesus through the Holy Spirit. So Jesus still shines in our world, in the lives of all who would look with the eyes of the heart and see him.

We share this morning in Holy Communion. In this simple act of breaking bread and sharing wine we participate in the life of Jesus, broken and given for us. We receive into our own bodies the glorified and risen life of Jesus. Because Jesus chose the cross.