

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Transforming Experiences

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Sunday 5th August 2012

Mark 9:1-13
2 Peter 1:16-19

There are times in life when, unexpectedly, you look at someone you know well and you see them in a different way than you have before. You look at them, and suddenly you will never look at them the same way again.

This week I was taking the funeral in Aviemore of a woman who met her husband when he and his friends pinched things from her counter at Woolworths in Inverness and she chased them. I do wonder at what point she looked at him or he at her and realised that this wasn't just the enemy, or the nuisance, but that they were to be everything to each other?

Way back in the 1980s I worked for a while in the junior boarding house of a girls' school in Edinburgh. One term we decided to put on "The Sound of Music", which I had to largely re-write to make it do-able by 8-14 year-olds. On the night of the performance, the mother of the girl who was playing Maria was sitting in the audience. She enjoyed the performance, proud of her daughter, until the scene near the end, when Maria appeared in her wedding dress. Suddenly there was a sob from the audience, and there was Maria's mother sniffing into her hankie. She told me afterwards that suddenly she had seen her 12 year-old as a young lady, not a little girl, and that she realised that she would never look at her just the same way again.

I knew what she meant, because I had had a similar experience in reverse. When I was in my late teens and early 20s I sang with the Scottish Baptist Youth Choir. We used to go around the country, meeting in church halls for a whole weekend of practice and a concert. One of these weekends, when I was away at university, was in Kirkcaldy. I knew that my mother would be there so, as I was standing in place waiting for the concert to start, I scanned the audience looking for her. I couldn't see her. I looked again and noticed a good friend of hers. Looking at the person on his left I wondered to myself who that white-haired lady was: and then it hit me: that was my mother! In my mind's eye I was looking for a dark-haired person, but she wasn't that person any more. It wasn't that she had become grey overnight. It was that I hadn't really been seeing her as she was. To my mind she was still the person she had been when I (and she) was younger. That was the night I realised that mothers too get older!

Many of you would be able to tell your own stories like these: stories of transformative moments in our understanding of another, and in our understanding of ourselves. The story of the transfiguration is the story of such a moment for Peter, James and John. The disciples see Jesus in a whole new way and this will eventually change how they see themselves as his followers.

In this strange happening, it was Jesus who was transfigured, but Mark tells the story from the point of view of the disciples. He can't, they can't, and we can't begin to know what the moment of transfiguration on the mountain meant to Jesus, how important it was to him, how it gave him needed reassurance or direction. I am sure that this was a very important moment for Jesus, but that is not why Mark tells us of it. He tells us because it was also important for the three disciples, and

from their experience we too can learn and have our understanding transformed. Jesus chose the three disciples to witness the event: he could have gone up the mountain alone, but he did not. He wanted his transfiguration to be known, so that we might have a fuller picture of who he really is. He wanted it told, eventually, that he was God's Son in full and holy glory.

Obviously, as we read in his letter, this event was to become a seminal moment in Peter's thinking and reflecting, even though at the time he reacted badly, even stupidly. Last week we saw Peter have a moment of insight followed by a reaction of blindness, as he proclaimed Jesus to be Messiah, then declared that the Messiah didn't know what he was talking about when he spoke of his suffering and death. Today he is given another moment of insight, and he reacts in bewilderment. Where silent watching might have been the best response, Peter is offering to do some building, to make each of the three holy figures a kind of den to camp in. It seems that he wants to prolong the moment.

Many commentators have said that this is so profoundly silly and banal a reaction that it must be true. The gospel writers would never have invented it, and Peter himself would surely never have let such a story be put out about himself, if it were not true. But before we mock Peter and his reaction, we should ask ourselves if we would do any better.

Last week we thought about our vision, and especially how there is always more to see of God and his Son Jesus; and how if we are to see more, and therefore know more and serve and follow better, we need to keep looking. We saw how we need to do more than take an occasional glance in Jesus' direction and then turn aside. We need to look intently.

On the mount of Transfiguration - probably Mount Hermon, just north of Caesarea Philippi - Peter could not bear to look intently. It would physically hurt his eyes. It was easier to turn his head aside. His inadequate response begs the question of how we deal with new revelations to our faith. Do we take them on board, with delight, eager to know more and allowing them to change us? You may, there are those who do; and if you do you are probably pretty far advanced along the path to sainthood!

Most of us would react a bit like Peter. If we are glad to know that there is a new revelation, that there is more to know, then we might try to preserve the moment of that understanding, however it comes. We might even make the experience of discovery, rather than what is discovered, the defining moment of our faith. In conversation with people, I often hear of this or that moment which has meant so much to them in their faith. It is fine, it is good to have special moments to look back on, but we cannot seek to live in these moments for ever. If we do that we are like Peter and his offer to build booths. Peter who could not cope with what God was telling him, how God was seeking to lead him, to help him grow through his moment of vision.

Or we may well do worse than Peter, for there is a lot worse that we could do. We could actually run away from the new thing we are seeing. We could say that what we learned of God at our mother's knee is all we ever need to know, and all we want to know.

Peter and his friends, to their credit, did try to understand. On their way down the hill they thought and asked questions - questions raised as much by Jesus binding them to temporary silence on the matter as by their experience on the hilltop.

Jesus, you see, talked to them about his resurrection, and that was another stretch of understanding for them. It was a stretch, not because they didn't believe in resurrection - most Jews did - but because in Jewish teaching the resurrection of the dead was to come *en masse* at the end of time, and Jesus was obviously not referring to that when he told them they could tell of his transfiguration after his resurrection. He was referring to an individual resurrection, with time stretching out

afterwards. The disciples clung to what they thought they knew about the Old Testament teaching that Elijah should come first - but they have just seen Elijah, and anyway they have also heard Jesus call John the Baptist Elijah (although he did not claim that title for himself). They had to get in their own way to what Jesus was showing them and teaching them, and Jesus let them do this.

There were a lot of new experiences and ideas to take on board that day, and Peter did, in the end, absorb them. In his second letter, as we read, he refers back to the transfiguration. In the years between the event and the letter Peter has thought deeply about it, and his conclusion is that he was given the vision of Christ's transfiguration so that he would know for sure that Jesus really was God's Son, and that this was not just something of which he had convinced himself. That too is why it was important that there was more than one witness to the event. He needed to be completely sure in his own mind so that he could speak with certainty about Jesus. He needed to be sure who it was he was urging others to follow, to whom they should listen.

God leads us onward in our faith, sometimes incrementally, inch by inch, like the movement of a glacier so that we hardly notice it until we look back to see where we have been; or else in sudden leaps and bounds as he did for the disciples on this momentous day. He leads us forward because he loves us and wants us to know him better. But he also leads us forward so that we will be better able to point to him, to point to his Son, Jesus, and say "Listen to him".

God leads us forward, and even if we make the wrong response, like Peter on the hilltop, it is better to do that than to make no response at all, or to run away. A wrong response is capable of correction. Immobility is difficult to get moving at all.

God doesn't expect our faith to remain static all our lives. What we believe, in basic fact, about God sending his Son, to die for us and save us, what we believe in the words of the creed, for example, may be true from childhood onwards: but how we know it and how it speaks to us and how it leads us to be with others and inter-act with the world, that should grow and change. How we express our faith should change too. The prayers of childhood, whether "Now I lay me down to sleep" or "God bless Mummy and Daddy" should not be the only prayers of a mature Christian. The hymns of our youth, although they may continue to express something of our faith, should not be the only hymns that we want to sing. In fact a church that has growing faith should be singing and writing new hymns! They should be hymns and songs that express the faith we have now and the way we share it, building on the old, but moving with God's Spirit into the new.

Jesus was transformed and shone before his astonished friends' gaze. They had never imagined that they would see anything like this! God, in his love, tells us to listen to him, to worship him, as his Son. As we do so, we too will find that there are things that we are shown which we could never have imagined. We will see things to do with the love of God revealed to us where we had not thought to see it. We will discover the power of God at work in our lives and the life of the world, where we had thought everything was just ordinary. Let us be people who allow God to surprise us, and to lead us forward, through the good times and the bad, knowing that he is always drawing us closer to himself, knowing that as we come closer to God we will be better able to show his love to others.

Amen.