

A sermon preached by Bishop Brian Farran, Epiphany 5 2005 at S. Barnabas Church, Kalamunda
(Based on Matthew 17:1-13)

I imagine that like me you have had experiences that transfigured you in some way. Or you have had moments of illumination when something or someone has become more radiantly clear to you, even transparent to you.

Recently I remembered such a moment from when I was sixteen. I am now sixty. Yet as I recall that moment it is as clear and as real as if it had just happened. Such is the after-glow of transfiguring experiences - the circumstances of the experience stay rivetted upon your memory.

As I was reflecting upon the Transfiguration story of Jesus as related by Matthew, I suddenly (quite visually) recalled a transfiguring experience that had deeply affected me. I had been to see a film version of Shakespeare's Macbeth. This was the Shakespearean text for the Leaving Certificate that I was to sit later that year. I was sixteen, going on seventeen. I was enthralled by the drama of this film version of Macbeth. I had been swept up into it.

I remembered travelling back on the tram from the city cinema to my suburban home at Maroubra Beach. I saw again the sunlight shafting gently through the tall poplar trees that lined the tram tracks adjacent to the Sydney Cricket Ground. I heard again the swishing noise of the tram as it sped along the tracks between the lines of trees. I was exhilarated, euphoric.

The text over which I had laboured in class had come so alive. I felt its sense of relevance and immediacy. I knew that I had been changed by that experience; its power was surging through me as I simply enjoyed a tram ride home in a euphoric state of mind! I had discovered something new about myself that I loved stories and English. The experience changed me (transfigured me). I was excited, energetic, engaged!

Not only did this experience of being in suspended from daily life in a cinema for two hours change my approach to my English studies, and the approaching final exams, it changed my awareness of what it was to be human through that Shakespearean story. Indeed, it confirmed my fledgling religious awareness, for it was a numinous experience. I felt as if I was being beckoned into something more than I was as yet aware. The experience of living into that Shakespearean text (brought alive in the film) opened me up.

Now that is an instance of a very ordinary transfiguration. The text became more than a text - a conglomerate of words. The text came alive, reached out, engaged me, created awareness, led me to appreciate fundamentals of human nature and decisions, and opened me to further dimensions in being human.

Daniel Taylor, in his book, The Healing Power of Stories¹ says,
our essential orientation to life is a consequence of the stories that form us. A genuine story will not leave us alone. It insists, sometimes in the most impolite terms, on changing us.²

Of stories, another writer, Ann Morisy says,
most of us can rise no higher than the stories that surround us, for the stories with which we grow up inform our imagination and compose our world. The capacity to see ourselves as something more and better than we presently are is dependent on the stories that we encounter, for in our imagination we continually link the past and the present with the future.

¹ Daniel Taylor. The Healing Power of Stories. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1996.

² Daniel Taylor. 1996. p. 17. and in Ann Morisy.2004. p.71.

We find our ‘potential self’ in the stories that surround us....³

The gospel writers knew both the power of transfiguring experiences and the formative power of stories. Who could dispute the influence of the stories about Jesus? These stories keep on shaping people, and history itself. These stories enable people to become more alive, more human, and more able to sense God.

Indeed, the gospels record experiences that transformed ordinary people in a variety of ways. The point of such stories is not simply a past record of what Jesus did, but a perspective of what Jesus will continue to do through his Risen Life.

Thus the gospel stories are never just past events. They remain concrete anticipations of potential experiences for people of all times and all places. We can experience events that transfigure us in some way, that release more of our potential, that open up life to us, that allow us to sense God more intimately.

In the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus, Matthew refers to what occurred on the mountain as a ‘vision’ (v9). Matthew is not collapsing this into a psychological experience. Rather he is indicating that the ‘seeing’ is not just a matter of observation. Something more is going on. The disciples gain insight -they see into the experience, into its meaning and continuing significance. Interestingly when the account of Moses ‘seeing’ the burning bush is recounted in a sermon in the Acts of the Apostles, the same word is used (Acts 7:31). The ordinary bush glowed with extraordinary significance and meaning for Moses.

The biblical stories stress the ‘extra’ in ordinary experiences. These ordinary events glow with the extraordinary and thus become religious moments, moments of profound insight and awareness of God.

This moment on the mountain is for the disciples a profound realisation of the nature of Jesus -who Jesus is. This is the moment when the inner group through this mystical experience, located in the traditional mystical place (a mountain top), apprehend that Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus is the One who fulfils the traditions of the Law (Moses) and the Prophets (Elijah). Jesus is the expected One, the longed for One.

The inner three disciples who will be the inner three again in the Garden of Gethsemane haltingly recognise that the formative religious traditions of Judaism merge in Jesus. At first, the three do not know how to respond. This is natural enough. Religious experience of such a substantial kind can bewilder people, even make them incoherent as they reach for words to try to describe what has gone on for them.

The climax in Matthew’s story of the Transfiguration comes with the divine voice. The divine voice ratifies Peter’s earlier confession that Jesus is the Messiah (given in Matthew’s previous chapter). The divine voice ratifies this confession by the Transfiguration experience that discloses Jesus as the culmination of what the traditions of the Law and Prophets were really disclosing. And the voice asks for obedience - “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.” (v5).

Seeing Jesus transfigured has value only if it leads the disciples to listen obediently to his divinely authorized teaching.⁴ This holds true for any religious experience in the Christian and Hebrew

³ Ann Morisy. 2004. op. cit., p. 81.

⁴ See Douglas Hare’s commentary on Matthew in the Interpretation Series, pp.198-200. The above reflects Hare’s insights.

traditions. Vision must lead to obedience, to action, to discipleship.

In the classic vision stories in Scripture - Moses at the Burning Bush, Isaiah in the Temple, Saul on the road to Damascus, the three disciples here on the mountain - those who were engaged by and with the vision became obedient to it. Indeed, their obedience is informed by the vision. That is, the content or nature of the vision shapes the kind of obedience that is practised.

Vision is not something to be privately treasured and caressed for spiritual self-stimulation. In the Bible vision leads to action for God. Hence, the emphasis in Matthew on the divine voice to pay attention to the teaching of Jesus. And Matthew's gospel is a compendium of teaching for Matthew's church that faced issues similar to the issues facing us. These issues included:

- + reluctance to be on mission
- + a mix of levels of commitment and obedience within the community
- + relationships within the community
- + dealing with adverse external pressures

When you aggregate these issues, they are substantial and very akin to our present context. So it will repay us to attend to Matthew's presentation of Jesus and his teaching. Hopefully, Matthew's story of Jesus will transfigure us, transfigure this congregation, so that the vision given galvanises us into real obedience that plays out in mission and service to our local community.

This is the good story that can inform us. This is the good story that can replace any inhibiting or demeaning stories that we have accepted about ourselves and about this church. Appreciation of this story does provide a vision of who we can be under God.

Individuals or societies cannot be argued out of their story, destructive though the story may be, unless there is a better one to replace it.⁵ The better story -this is what Matthew's gospel essentially is- can be a transfiguring event that gives us extraordinary energy, excitement, and engagement with God.

The Transfiguration of Jesus was the indicator that a better story had arrived for everyone. It is a continuing matter of us 'paying attention' to the Transfigured Jesus so that we too can be transfigured.

⁵ Daniel Taylor. 1996. op. cit. p. 85.