

## Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

**The Reverend Andrew Sempell**

*Rector of St James*

**Last Sunday after Epiphany  
(Transfiguration)**

**11<sup>th</sup> February 2018**

**Readings:**            2 Kings 2: 1-12;                            Psalm 50: 1-6;  
                              2 Corinthians 4: 3-12;                Mark 9: 2-9.

### *“Encountering the Sacred”*

In the western part of Ireland stands a great mountain called Croagh Patrick. It is said to be the place where St Patrick spent a forty day fast in preparation for his mission to the Irish people. Every year, at the end of July, thousands of pilgrims climb the mountain, (some barefoot), to pray and worship. Through this the pilgrims seek a mountain-top experience to encourage them on their Christian journey.

Mountains often appear in the Bible, and in other religions, as places where people go to draw close to God or the sacred. Today we focus on the significance of mountain-top experiences through the story of the Transfiguration. It provided for Peter, James and John a glimpse into the nature of the kingdom of God; but it proved to be a difficult experience.

The Transfiguration appears in all three synoptic gospels. It describes Jesus taking three of his disciples up a mountain to pray; and there Jesus is transformed before them. His face shone, his clothes became pure white, and they saw a vision of Moses and Elijah talking with him. Peter did not know what to say and babbled on about making three shelters in which they could stay. Then a cloud engulfed them, and they were afraid. Finally, a voice said: ‘This is my beloved Son; listen to him’.

The account of the Transfiguration is challenging. It defies our understanding of the physical world, for it describes the breaking-in of the kingdom of God into the natural order. But there can be ecstatic moments in our lives when the spiritual dimension becomes more apparent than the physical and we too have a vision of heaven.

The Transfiguration appears in Mark’s Gospel after Peter’s recognition of Jesus as Messiah at Caesarea Philippi. In this respect, the Transfiguration is understood to be a confirmation of what Peter had recognised in Jesus. Through the vision, God affirms the disciples in their new understanding of the nature and mission of Jesus.

Of significance is the presence of Moses and Elijah. Moses is the ‘giver of the law’ – the first great leader of God’s people who brought them out of slavery in Egypt. Elijah, on the other hand, represents the tradition of the prophets – those whose task was to call people back to faithfulness. Together, Moses and Elijah represent most of what is significant in the Old Covenant – the law and the prophets. Through the Transfiguration, Jesus is revealed as the one who brings a new law and prophecy.

Another aspect of the Transfiguration is suffering. Immediately before the mountaintop experience, Jesus invited his followers to ‘take up their cross and follow him’. You see, the way to spiritual growth and understanding also involves some pain. Jesus told his disciples that he would need to suffer and die. Clearly, they found this statement unpalatable and misunderstood the full meaning of what he was saying – even, in the case of Peter, to the extent of denial.

The story therefore goes from the high of Peter’s confession, to the low of Jesus foretelling his death, and back to the high of the Transfiguration. Similarly, many people experience life as being like a roller-coaster that slowly climbs to the crest of happiness and joy to be followed by a rush downward into difficulty and despair. The fluctuations between joy and sadness are part of our human condition.

As the disciples could not stay on the mountain with Jesus, so we too must move on, pick up the cross and follow Jesus. A temptation in the Christian journey of faith is to want to avoid the difficulties and challenges of the world and to have a life of ease and prosperity; but this is not the reality. Christians are not exempt the difficulties of life, but what we can have is a highly integrated view of how life works that helps us to make sense of it a live with its moods.

Jesus’ journey to the cross, which we will recount during the season of Lent that begins this Wednesday, reminds us that there is a cost to the peace and assurance of salvation.

One of our human errors is to sometimes deny or down-grade Jesus’ humanity. Jesus was not God ‘disguised’ as a human being, but rather was both fully human and divine. Jesus therefore felt the emotions, shared the thoughts and felt the physical realities of life as any human does. The writers of the Creeds went to great lengths to ensure that we understand this. Jesus was fully human, yet the Spirit of God was also wholly present in him.

It is for this reason that we focus on the person of Jesus. He is the model for our own lives for we too have the Spirit of God within us. We are not Christ (for we have not been fully transformed), but we are little Christs - in the process of becoming more like him, which is our spiritual journey.

When we are tempted, we can think of Jesus being tempted in the desert and perhaps be encouraged to resist. When we are rejected by those around us, perhaps we can think of Jesus being rejected by his own people in Nazareth and therefore be empowered to move on from those who only look backward. When we face a crisis in our lives perhaps we can think of Jesus praying for strength before he went to the cross. Even at the point of death we can take hope by focusing on the resurrection of Jesus, which is both a sign and promise of the resurrection that God offers each one of us. But resurrection is more than merely spiritual life insurance, it is also the present transformative experience that we have in our day-to-day lives.

Life is a journey; and, as God's people, we need experiences that give us a vision of the future and bring us hope, even in the face of hardship. In short, we need to make sense out of suffering and pain.

Many will know the pressures of busy lives, economic uncertainty, personal health problems, environmental disasters, the fear of lawlessness, and the feeling of powerlessness in the face of those who seek to mistreat us. Yet the Bible reminds us that, while this is part of the human condition, we do have the ability to overcome our fears of the unknown and feelings of meaninglessness and powerlessness.

The spiritual journey is a process of transformation, so that we may become the people that God wants us to be, but we can therefore never say that we have arrived. Likewise, we can never say that we have all knowledge, or all wisdom, or that we have experienced all things. And so, the journey goes on through a process of being and becoming that is grounded on the hope of purposefulness and fulfilment.

Hope is not something that is just 'made up', it arises from our experiences and reflections upon life and a narrative that helps us understand it. Christian hope is therefore centred on the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus. But there is more; our hope has been nurtured through the church over the past two thousand years. It is expressed for us in the Bible, in our worship, life-experiences, traditions and understandings of the activity of God in the world. It also includes those transfiguration moments when we are 'caught up into heaven'.

We are physical, emotional, mental and spiritual beings and all these aspects of life need to be nurtured to achieve maturity and fulfilment. We do not know the outcome, but through faith, hope and love God gives us the power to take risks and live a meaningful life. Even amid despair, God is present. Moreover, God remains active in our lives today, as he was in Jesus, in his disciples, and in his followers for the past two thousand years.

Through the upcoming season of Lent, we remind ourselves of the journey of Jesus to the cross and his resurrection and glorification by God, so that we too may discover ourselves in the story and be caught up into the kingdom of God.