

Monday Message May 25 2020

The Transfiguration

¹After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. ²There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. ³Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.

⁴Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.”

⁵While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!”

⁶When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. ⁷But Jesus came and touched them. “Get up,” he said. “Don’t be afraid.” ⁸When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.

⁹As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, “Don’t tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

Today’s bible reading comes from St Mathew’s Gospel. Although it is about events that happened around 2000 years ago, it contains I think a message appropriate for the situation we now find ourselves in.

It is the story of the transfiguration. Jesus took three of his closest disciples with him up a high mountain. There, his whole appearance was transformed and his face “shone like the sun.” Out of nowhere he was joined by two of the most famous prophets – both long dead - Moses and Elijah. And then to cap it all, a voice from heaven announced – “This is my Son with whom I am well pleased.” Despite these three remarkable occurrences, the disciples with him couldn’t really make sense of what they had witnessed. They still hadn’t fully grasped that Jesus was in fact the Son of God.

That failure to recognise Jesus brings to mind another passage from the Gospel, in fact the same one that Noma Sensei selected it a few weeks ago when he gave the Monday message - it’s the story about the

meeting at Emmaus. (PRON: e may us) Two disciples were walking in the countryside outside Jerusalem, shortly after Jesus had been killed. They were afraid and uncertain. They were joined on their walk by a man whom they didn't recognise but who somehow seemed familiar. It was only later that evening after they had shared a meal together and the mysterious figure had broken bread with them – that Cleopas and his companion suddenly recognised the man as Jesus, but then in a moment he had vanished from their sight.

There are many things about this story that seem incredible – the most obvious being the Resurrection: Jesus coming back to life after being crucified in front of hundreds of people. This is in fact the cornerstone of the Christian faith, the belief that death on earth does not mark the end of our lives but rather the beginning of another new life, an afterlife spent, hopefully, in heaven. No doubt this Christian belief has been a tremendous comfort to tens of thousands of people all over the world in recent weeks, as they have watched loved ones succumb to Covid 19.

But I digress.. Today I want to focus on another aspect of these two stories, which also challenges our credulity. How could Peter, James and John, the three apostles who accompanied him to the top of that mountain, fail to recognise him as the Son of God, even after they heard the voice of God saying it was so? Likewise, how could Cleopas walk several miles with the risen Jesus, talk to him, share supper with him, and yet still fail to recognise him? How is that possible?

And yet.

Aren't we all guilty of the same thing? Don't we often fail to recognise the true worth of people? Don't we fail to see the inherent goodness of others on a daily basis?

Over these last three months, there have been people in our midst – some of whom we know very well – people we've walked and talked with, maybe worked and joked with, people whom we have failed to 'recognise' fully and failed to appreciate properly. Of course, they are not Gods, but they are people full of HIS goodness.

Perhaps they've included hospital porters, cleaners, nurses, doctors, care workers in day centres and residential homes for the elderly, pharmacists and paramedics. These are the obvious ones.

But there have been many others: people working in funeral homes, in cemeteries, in shops, the people who supply the shops, delivery drivers, postal workers, garbage collectors, firefighters, police officers, clergy and more.

Even in this college there is a small army of people who work quietly behind the scenes to make sure that teachers and students are able to enjoy classes together, whether those classes be on campus or in the virtual world. These are people that we don't often notice, still less, say thank you to.

Closer to home, there are other people we haven't 'seen' properly either – our family and friends who are always there for us – pandemic or no pandemic – people who, inexplicably, value their relationship with us, even when we treat them badly.

Before Covid 19 – I thought pandemics, like the plagues of locusts that ravaged crops in Egypt, were something that only happened in the Bible. But in less than six months, like everyone else I've had to re-evaluate what is possible and what is not. I've also had to reconsider what is important and what is not.

The Covid-19 crisis has brought heartbreak on an almost biblical scale. Thankfully Okinawa has so far escaped the worst but we can't ignore the terrible stories emerging from elsewhere in the world.

But, remarkably and improbably, the virus has also brought recognition, too. Recognition of the people we have been walking alongside, people who have been with us for a long time, but whose wondrousness we have somehow overlooked. Well, we are no longer blind, we see you now.