

Reflection: *Visiting Minister, The Rev Ken Smith*

Have you ever had any “mountaintop” experiences? Where God dazzled you with God’s glory, where you knew beyond doubt you were in the presence of God, where God touched you in transforming ways?

I suspect many of us have had some such experience - OK, maybe not as dramatic as the one Peter and James and John were given; that’s pretty high on the “WOW!” scale! Certainly, that’s an experience they’d always remember vividly that would shape their lives forever. But I have a hunch many of us have some sort of what we call a “mountaintop” experience, perhaps at a camp, perhaps in the mountains, when we get away from the routine and give God a place and a space to encounter us, where God spoke to us in a special way, where God touched us with his undeniable presence, maybe his command or a clear direction for our lives. It’d be good to share some of those times (we don’t tend to talk much about that sort of stuff, but I believe it would enrich our life together if we did).

And if you have never had such an experience - that’s OK too! God doesn’t need to dazzle us to speak to us or assure us of his presence. Often, it’s God’s “still small voice” that comes to us, maybe in the quiet of our home, or in a chapel in a hospital where we, or someone we love, is facing a serious illness. God has lots of ways to speak to us. So, the real question may be, “Are we listening?” “Are we listening?”

Well, in this crazy story for today we call the Transfiguration, you can bet Pete and Jim and John were listening! Dazzling, blinding white light, then suddenly they see 2 of the all-time greats, Moses and Elijah (representing the Law and the Prophets) standing there with Jesus. And then God’s reassuring verdict out of the cloud (which in scripture is often a sign of God’s powerful presence) saying: “This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased - listen to him!” Wow! What an encounter with the living God! The disciples are overwhelmed, understandably. They bow down in worship and fear. But Jesus simply touches them and says, “Fear not.” Don’t be afraid - I am still here with you.

I believe a key verse in this account is the last one, easy to overlook but so important to realise: “When they came down from the mountain.” They didn’t stay there. Peter wanted to; he said, “Let’s build a shrine up here,” a place to hold onto and come back to. But they didn’t. They came back down the mountain, back down to earth, to the valleys where most of our lives are lived. Mountaintop experiences may touch us and shape us, but we live in the valleys.

There’s a large Christian conference centre in the mountains above Los Angeles (and yes, there are mountains surrounding Los Angeles, tho’ you can be there quite a while and never see them!). It’s called Forest Home Conference Center and it’s one mile above sea level. There’s a sign there saying: “One mile closer to heaven.” And at one point someone added a line below that saying, “And one mile farther from earth.” Have you heard the quote: “Some people are so heavenly minded they’re no earthly good”?

The church calendar is divided into several time periods. Some seem special - and one is coming up this week: Lent, which begins Wednesday and leads us to Easter. There’s also

Advent, Eastertide, etc. But most days are called “Ordinary time.” Ordinary days. Not very imaginative, kind of, well, ordinary. But that’s OK because most of our days are indeed ordinary days. Do you remember what you did last, say, Oct. 16? Or last August 24? Unless it was your birthday or something special chances are it blurred into another day, not spectacular or dazzling, just another ordinary day. But that’s where life is lived. That’s where faith is lived out, day by ordinary day. Walking with Christ, living out his love each day. That matters. And this season of Lent is a great opportunity to practice God’s presence with us - or better, to practice being aware of God’s presence with us wherever we find ourselves each day.

Lent reminds me of a story I read, set in Paris. One dark evening a Catholic priest is walking through a dark alley - when a robber steps out and accosts him, demanding his money. Disturbed, the priest throws back his coat to get his wallet - and the robber sees his clerical collar. Surprised, the robber says, “I didn’t know you were a priest; it wouldn’t be right to take your money, so I’ll just be on my way.” The priest is of course relieved but also thinks maybe there’s hope for this fellow, so the priest offers him a cigarette as a means of engaging him in conversation. But the robber says, “No thanks, father - I’ve given up smoking for Lent.” It’s always a good idea to give up smoking but maybe he should also give up robbing! I’m not sure he fully caught the purpose of Lent!

Lent is a gift from God. It can be a time to put into practice walking with God every day and being aware of his presence around and within us. Let me suggest that maybe using this limited time - it’s only 40 days, which makes it seem more doable as a time let God love you. Let God love you. The insightful Dutch priest Henri Nouwen said we could take just 5 minutes a day simply sitting in the presence of God, doing nothing, just sitting - and realising God is loving you even when you are doing nothing. Let God’s love fill you daily. Let God open your eyes - so you can see God more clearly, listening for his voice, tune in to his presence. See where God shows up for you. Be open to the possibility - probability - you can encounter God anywhere anytime. To see God’s creativity surrounding us with beauty, noticing the crazy colours of creation in all its wonder and imagination. We now live in Mexico and love life there, but it’s high desert, very sunny every day but not so green. So being here we marvel at all the many shades of green! What an imaginative God we have to do that!

I believe the short passage from Mark 8 gives us clues about how to grow in realising God’s presence in our lives. A blind man is brought to Jesus so he can be cured. First Jesus spits in his eyes - Yuck! What kind of bedside manner is that? But in those days it was believed that saliva had healing properties so I imagine the fellow wasn’t too bothered. Jesus asks him, “Can you see?” And the man replies, “Sort of, but it’s fuzzy. I see people but they look like trees walking around.” So, Jesus touches him a 2nd time - and his eyes are opened and he sees clearly, his vision is fully restored.

But... what’s with that? Why does it take Jesus a 2nd touch to heal him? Usually, he heals with just one touch - or even just a word. I think this is the only time where Jesus needs a 2nd touch. Is Jesus just having an off day? Didn’t bring his A game? As an American, I tend

to think Jesus needed to check and see if the man had the right medical insurance policy to be healed.

I really don't know why it takes Jesus a 2nd touch here. But what I do know is how true to life that is. I seldom get it right the 1st time. I go from blind to fuzzy, then still fuzzy, before I begin to see more clearly. So God needs to give me a 2nd touch. And a 3rd. And a 5th and 25th and so on. It takes time. It takes time to see more clearly, and to see God more clearly. And to see people more clearly. To see them as God sees them.

I saw a nature documentary a while ago, on National Geographic or one of the nature channels. It was about wildebeest, who number in the many millions in Africa. When a baby wildebeest is born, I imagine its Mum thinks, "What a cute little guy or girl!" But a nearby lion or wild dog thinks, "Dinner!" There's not much margin for error when you're surrounded by hungry predators. So, the documentary pointed out, 5 minutes after its birth - 5 minutes! - a baby wildebeest can stand up. And 10 minutes after its birth, a new-born wildebeest can outrun a lion! 10 minutes? Outrun a lion?! Are you kidding?! Can you think of anything you mastered in 10 minutes? Playing golf? Learning to play a musical instrument? Learning a foreign language? Joan and I are struggling learning Spanish - and 5 years on it's still a challenge! Growth takes time.

Fortunately, God is patient with us; he keeps touching us over and over again to help us grow in grace.

Someone said that instead of New Year's Resolutions we should have a New Year's Prayer. Or in our case now, a prayer for Lent to guide us through this season. Something to focus on as we walk with Christ these 40 days - to the cross and to Easter. Lent is a great time to focus - on seeing God more clearly. My personal hope for me during this time is to not only see God more clearly but to see everyone and everything through the eyes of Christ. What does this person, this situation, look like to God? How would Christ see what's going on and how would he respond? Can we grow in looking through the eyes of God, the eyes of love?

Let me close with a prayer for Lent, written in the 1200s by Sir Richard of Chichester. He was a saintly fellow, the bishop of Chichester, well regarded. And his prayer became rather well-known over the centuries. And then it got more play when it was included in the musical of a few years back, *Godspell*. Do you remember that lively take on the gospel? They used Sir Richard's prayer, jazzed it up a bit, put it to music - "Day by Day...." But the heart of the song is Sir Richard's prayer:

"Dear Lord, of thee three things I pray: to see thee more clearly, to love thee more dearly, and to follow thee more nearly, day by day."

May we see God more clearly and see others clearly through the eyes of Christ. See everyone as God's child; I believe God can see people only through his eyes of love. Mother Teresa said: "if we have no peace, it's because we have forgotten that we belong to each other." We do belong to each other. What if the world is divided, not into saints and sinners (we're all some of each!), not into the saved and the damned - but into those who are loved

by God, and know it, and those who are loved by God - and don't know it? Can we tell them - better, show them - that they too are loved by God, and all are God's beloved children?! What if everyone is indeed God's beloved child? Can we see both God and others more clearly through God's eyes of love, day by day.