

02 MARCH 2025 A Reflection Rev Wayne Toleafoa

JESUS TRANSFIGURED

Readings: Exodus 34:29-35; 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2; Luke 9:28-43a

All our readings today have to do with transfiguration. One interpretation of that word is: 'Experience of temporary divine radiance or light ', or another interpretation: 'complete change of form or appearance into a more beautiful or spiritual state'.

In our first reading, Moses' encounter with the Holiness of God causes Moses' face to shine – so much so that the Israelites are afraid to approach him. Moses was transfigured. His appearance is changed to a more beautiful, spiritual state.

But, as with all encounters with the holy, there is an accompanying sense of awe and dread.

In our second reading from St Paul's Letter to the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2) Paul refers to the story of Moses and his veiled face.

He then goes on to talk about the transformation that happens to believers when we turn to Christ: When we turn to Christ, we are turning our faces towards the Holy.

¹⁶'but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. ¹⁷Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. ¹⁸And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit'.

We are being transfigured as we look to Jesus whom Paul describes as The Spirit who creates freedom.

'Now the Lord is Spirit, and where the spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom'(V17).

A wonderful verse that reminded the early believers (and us) that they we are not bound by the religious Law/laws which cannot bring them (or us) closer to God.

We are transfigured as we look to the Holy – and let the Spirit of Christ work in us to make us more Christlike.

You might not feel Christlike, but if you have invited Christ's Spirit to live in you, you are being transformed. You may not feel transformed, but others who know you, will notice. Every believer has something Christlike about them.

During the Art deco week end my wife and I went to see two operas performed, back-to-back, on the same night, at the Municipal theatre in Napier. Two operas for the price of one.

The first opera was a classical, rather serious, tragedy and love story called, 'Dido and Aeneas' composed by Henry Purcell in 17th century. Beautiful music, beautiful costumes. Beautiful words. Beautiful, but tragic plot. Like Romeo and Juliet – the lovers belong to two warring nations and like Romeo and Juliet, a misunderstanding lead to death and the end of a beautiful relationship.

The performers were all local Hastings and Napier people of all ages including some very young singers from Havelock North. Some girls from Hukarere College were in the chorus group. It was all in Italian – with English subtitles which were lit up across the top of the stage for the benefit of us barbarians who cannot speak Italian.

The second play/opera was also in Italian. This time, an Italian comedy called, 'Gianni Schicchi' – set in the 1930s . The story of a greedy family waiting for a rich uncle to die - so that they can inherit his property.

The greedy rellys find out that their uncle has willed his estate to a local monastery – so they hatch a cunning plan to stop this from happening.

When the uncle dies, they hire a famous lawyer by the name of Gianni Schicchi, to overturn the will.

The opera had us all in fits of laughter, all the way through to the cunning twist at the end where the uncle awakes from his coma.

The thing about these two operas is that the same company /cast of actors performed both plays.

In the interval between the plays, the players transformed themselves into new characters and new personas. Went from a serious classical to light-hearted comedy.

I was also surprised to see a minister I know, among the cast. I had no idea that he had any interest in opera and acting. I saw a side of him that I didn't know existed. He was pretty good too and a main actor. From now on I will see him differently, as a talented actor and singer.

As I reflected on the story of the transfiguration, I thought about the two operas I mentioned, and my minister friend.

How the players adopted new identities and new personas in the roles they played.

When the three disciples climbed the mountain that day, they saw another side of Jesus they had not seen before. Like the actors in a play Jesus took on a new persona.

The disciples saw a vision of Jesus with his face and clothing shining, like the appearance of Moses in Exodus. They saw Jesus conversing with Moses the Law-giver and Elijah the Prophet.

We know that when the Jews sought God's will, they looked to two sources of truth: the Laws of Moses and to the Prophets.

After their mountain-top vision the disciples believed that Jesus was a third source of revelation, making up a Trinity of Moses representing the Law, Elijah representing all the prophets and Jesus representing the Spirit.

They also saw Jesus as someone who combined in himself all three sources of divine knowledge – the Law and the Prophets and the Spirit of God. All three personas were combined in the person of Jesus.

The disciples wanted to build three monuments to this new Holy Trinity, but just as they expressed this idea, they were covered by a cloud, and out of the cloud they heard a voice giving Jesus another identity:

³⁴While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. ³⁵Then from the cloud came a voice that said, 'This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!'

Whether it was an audible voice – or an inner conviction speaking to the disciples we don't know. We only know that the cloud represented the mystery of God. Out of the mystery of God, Jesus was revealed as 'the Chosen One'. Out of the cloud the disciples discerned that Jesus was someone special.

After the mountaintop experience, the disciples were never able to see Jesus as just a Rabbi, however brilliant.

They saw Jesus as the Law & the Prophets and the Spirit of God, all rolled into One. They saw Jesus as 'the chosen One' - The promised Messiah.

Our gospel reading today adds a miracle – like a tail at the end of the story of the Transfiguration. We know that Luke was a physician who took a special interest in the healing miracles.

When Jesus and the disciples come 'down to earth' they are immediately confronted with the ordinary world where people suffer, get sick and die.

A young boy suffering from convulsions (attributed to demons) is cured by Jesus. And 'given back to his father' as though his sickness had made him a different person. Now he was transfigured - as it were - and 'given back' to his father – healed, and restored – the same son, but also 'a new person'.

We can safely assume that the boy later died – but what the story is also telling us, is that God was with the boy in life and in death just as God is with us.

Once we have seen Christ, or known the Spirit of Christ, we have seen the Holy and we are being transformed by that experience as we continue pray and worship God during our daily lives.

Our prayers and devotions don't need to be formal. I remember a sailor telling me how when he was a young sailor, he had trouble holding on to his faith and having trouble praying. So, he went to the Chaplain and told him his problem. The Chaplain Rev Maori Marsden (a legendary chaplain among the Navy chaplains) advised him simply to say the name of Jesus and to say it often.

PRAYER

God of mountaintops and valleys and everywhere in between, we thank you for meeting us where we are. We thank you also for leading us to this place of prayer and renewal. Enlighten our minds, and hearts, grant us your Spirit of freedom. Let your holiness shine in and through us, lighting a path of grace, hope, and joy. May the same transfiguring power, that was in Jesus Christ, also shine in us for the good of the world. **Amen.**