

Sunday next before Lent 2011 – St Peter's

Exodus 24:12-18; Matthew 17:1-9

The first boyhood crush I can remember occurred when I was about 10 yrs. old. I fell for a girl in my class at Primary School. I think she'd been in my class all through Junior School at least, but it was only then that I suddenly saw her with new eyes. She'd always worn her hair in pigtails, until one particular day – which I can still remember – when she arrived at school with her hair styled and not bunched. This had the effect of softening her features and revealing (to me at least) a beauty that had so far completely passed me by.

The effect of 'The Transfiguration', as we call it, of Jesus to his disciples on that mountain top was something similar. It may seem rather trite, or even irreverent, to liken my childhood crush to the experience of Jesus' disciples, but bear with me, if you will. Of course The Transfiguration marked a key shift in how Jesus the charismatic teacher came to be regarded as Son of God by that small group of followers. But there are similarities to make. The Jesus they had known so familiarly became more mysterious after this episode. The voice from the cloud made them 'overcome with fear'. What he said as they descended the mountain hardly lessened this effect. They were to tell no-one about the vision until he had 'been raised from the dead'? Now he was becoming a bit scary! When I began to notice Margaret Watson (that was her name...I wonder what she's doing now?), I moved from a position of never having given her a second thought, to finding that she occupied many of my thoughts day and night. The experience was far from comfortable, and it began to matter far too much what she may be thinking about me. It was a bitter-sweet experience.

The 20th c. Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, believed that such disturbing, life-changing experiences, right from birth to death, are gateways along our journey with God. He wrote:

All religious reality begins with what Biblical religion calls the "fear of God". It comes when our existence between birth and death becomes incomprehensible and uncanny, when all security is shattered through the mystery...the unknowable.

The experience of love, and even of falling in love at a tender age, is perhaps an obvious example of this. The first New Testament letter of John states, with good reason, "God is love, and those who live in love live in God, and God lives in them" – this was the opening sentence at Emma and Mark's wedding here last Saturday. But there are other life moments which bring us face to face with the wonder and mystery of God. One such is the experience

of reconciliation. Being estranged from friends or other family members can be painful, and being brought back into acceptance and closeness with them can be profoundly humbling and joyous. At Evening Prayer only on Friday, the first reading from Genesis told of the wonderful meeting of reconciliation between Jacob and his brother, Esau. Jacob approached his brother - after so many years of bitterness, hatred and recrimination – in fear and trembling. But ‘Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept’, were told. Jacob’s words to Esau are very significant here: “...truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God – since you have received me with such favour”

As I said, Martin Buber saw moments such as this as gateways. He described it this way:

Through this dark gate the believing [person] steps forth into the everyday which is henceforth hallowed as the place in which he has to live with the mystery. He steps forth directed and assigned to the concrete... situations of his experience. To us, as Christians, our link between the ‘everyday’ and the whole mystery of being is in Jesus – that’s really the meaning of the Transfiguration event in our Gospel today. We are about to enter the season of Lent – a season in which Christians traditionally take on a particular discipline, which is often expressed in terms of ‘giving something up’. But perhaps an equally valid way of approaching Lent is as an opportunity to have our own ‘mountain-top’ experience – to let the forty days of Lent leading up to Easter be for us a gateway that can lead us to see our lives differently. Lent invites us to change the rhythm of our lives, to step aside from the feverish rhythm of the world around us - which regards daily tasks and actions only as a means to an end – and to see our daily routine with new eyes, patiently allowing everyday things to become places and people in which we encounter God and understand something more of his mystery and love, as we root ourselves more in an attitude of continuous prayer.