

TRANSFIGURATION Year B : LAST SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY, 22/02/ 2009**The Transforming Gift**

In the name of God, earth-maker, pain-bearer, and life giver.

The Prime Minister has declared today as a National Day of Mourning for the victims of the Victorian bushfires. As we touched on last week, we can see this as a natural sequence – we have been in shock, we have counted the losses, and struggled with the impetus for life to go on. Now we bury the dead, lay to rest the immediate crisis, and formally begin to move on.

The work of the church, and the task of a preacher or priest, at times of crisis and post crisis, isn't so much the giving of comfort and welfare, it's to help all around us –in our congregations, in our community –that is, all of us, myself included - to think through those huge questions about life and death that are part and parcel of the ashes left following such a tragedy. And the great gift from God is that he has given us the essential components of our resource-bag for reflection and for the transformation and healing that is possible: the Scriptures, prayer, and the Sacraments, and the God-given gift to hear and see God in the midst of all of life, good and bad. So we open the set Scriptures of today with an expectation and faith that God still speaks through these ancient words into the challenges of this time and place.

Last week, in the aftermath of the fires, we considered how it was that life could go on. With the Gospel story of Jesus healing the leper, we considered the leprosies and the bush fires of our own lives, and how Christ reaches out to touch those in need; not because of any inherent worthiness of our own, but because this is the nature of a loving God who weeps with us, a God we see and experience in Christ. Life does go on, through the grace and love of God in Christ, and there is restoration to a *fullness* of life only possible in him.

And so, today, we meet Jesus Christ in a most extraordinary scene, and we meet the Apostle Paul, and listen to these passages as they speak to us on this National Day of Mourning, about the power of God to change and transform our lives.

In today's Gospel, we hear that Jesus was "transfigured" – metamorphosed, transformed, radically changed – in front of his select disciples, Peter, James and John.

There they were, up on a mountain top - traditionally a place where the ancients expected to have holy experiences, a place where it was believed that the divine touched the human – when Jesus suddenly transfigured into a flashing, supernatural brilliant white, right in front of them, and was seen talking with long dead heroes of the faith, Elijah and Moses.

Peter bumbled on about building three shrines for Jesus, Elijah and Moses. And, then, to top off the frightening eeriness of the scene, a voice boomed out of a cloud which overshadowed them "This is my son, the Beloved. Listen to him!" Then suddenly, the disciples were left alone with an undazzling Jesus. Here on this craggy, bleak mountain top Peter, James, John stare into a stark unveiling of the divine face of God in Jesus; an unavoidable confrontation with the full meaning of who Jesus is: Jesus, divine and human, God's Son, and the one replacing the prophets (like Elijah) and law-makers (Moses) of old.

And here we glean an invitation to enter into this transformation ourselves: because from this revelation everything must change. If we truly grasp hold of, and believe, that this is who Jesus Christ is, then all our reference points for understanding what life is really about *must change* – something beyond the normal dimensions of our natural world is now factored in; nothing can ever be quite the same. We are taken beyond our otherwise limited perceptions. We can either discount it, or choose to follow regardless of how much we understand.

What could something like this possibly say to us in our day to day lives, or in the midst of bushfires and the like?

Two weeks ago, we heard the beautiful verses from Isaiah, about mounting up with wings like eagles – lifted high above the world, being able to look down on what was happening and seeing it differently, from God's perspective. In the same way, the impact of Jesus' transfiguration is to bring about our own transformation – a renewal of a mind set from how it is so

often for us – we get caught with how things are and can't see beyond or above them...to being able to see and experience things with the mind and heart of God.

In the face of God revealing himself to us, we've got choices in how we can respond. We can respond like Peter – let's keep all this under control, build a shrine where we can tuck God away and keep him at the mountaintop; keep him safe and at a distance and tamed; essentially saying: "let's not get carried away with this; let's keep God contained; who knows what might happen if he's let loose in our lives?". Or the other choice: be open to the transforming, transfiguring power of Jesus Christ. And listen to him!

In his letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul tells us that we, too, can expect just as much a radical transformation in our own lives that we see with the dazzling white Jesus– this is the transformative effect of God shining in our hearts. One contemporary rendering of these verses says it beautifully: "The very God who kicked off creation by calling for light to shine from darkness has now filled our hearts with the light that comes from seeing the glory of God in the face of Jesus the Christ and knowing it for what it is." (*Nathan Nettleton*)

So, back again to the question: what does this mean for us in our lives? Basically, the promise and gift of a transformation that comes from joining our lives with Christ's.

Once we've begun to follow Christ, however we may come to that, something changes, irreversibly; life's not just about here and now earth-bound realities; we begin the journey to seeing and understanding things of God, and seeing life through God's eyes. This is a lifetime journey of being transformed, not a once-for-all event. And it's not something we are making happen on our own. It's God who is the change maker, who breaks through from heaven to earth, who "shines in our hearts" and switches on the lights, lifts the veil. And yes, the journey will come with lots of questions and much struggle and apparent blindness. Those disciples came away from the mountain top and they weren't immediately changed: they struggled,

quarrelled and stumbled. But God's sort of revelation and transformation is one that unfolds itself and begins to make sense only as we follow.

Listen further to what transformation meant for the Apostle Paul, reading a contemporary version of today's reading: "If you only look at us, you might well miss the brightness. We carry this precious Message –(this life of Christ)- around in the unadorned clay pots of our ordinary lives. That's to prevent anyone from confusing God's incomparable power with us. As it is, there's not much chance of that. You know for yourselves that we're not much to look at. We've been surrounded and battered by troubles, but we're not demoralized; perplexed, but not driven to despair, persecuted, but God hasn't left our side; we've been struck down, but we haven't broken. What they did to Jesus, they do to us—trial and torture, mockery and murder; what Jesus did among them, he does in us—he lives!" (2 Cor 4:7-11, *mostly from The Message*)

On this Day of National Mourning, we have a gift – a God who has revealed his glory to us..... a God who can re-orient our perspectives....a God who can transform ashes into new life.... a God who is with us in the battering and bruising of life.....and a God who can transform us, from the inside out. If only we will accept that gift of his life, revealed and offered to us in Jesus Christ.