



## **Transfiguration Rev Cate Thorn**

Year A, Transfiguration  
Exodus 34: 29-35; Luke 9: 28-36  
6 August 2023

The transfiguration's a liturgical opportunity not often taken up. I'm not quite sure why, other than that it seems so ethereal. It's not a parable or story with concrete imagery that is familiar and touchable by us. It is as if it is a fantasy, something that happened but to what end.

In today's gospel Jesus and three of his disciples go to a mountain top, ascend to the vast silence that inhabits such remoteness. Upon the mountaintop, we hear, Jesus is transfigured and time transformed, the figure of Jesus in this scene provides continuity with the past and hope for the future. The disciples actually sleep deeply through the Elijah, Moses and Jesus conversation moment (even though somehow this story's told). It's in half-asleep awakeness they see Jesus' glory and two people standing with him. Peter's voice clouds the vision of the disciples, yet from within such clouded vision we hear the voice name Jesus as God's Own, the Chosen One, bestowed voice of authority. When the vision fades we find Jesus - alone and the disciples admonished to say nothing to anyone.

Despite this we still tell the story. The trans-figuration story straddles time as we know it, breaks open the usual limits of our perception. It offers us a vision through and beyond our lineal conception of time and history, suggests an interconnection of existence beyond our brief span of years.

Early in my adult life I was concerned and at times consumed with the pursuit of evidence to reassure me there was more to existence than just the passing occupations of a busy life. Along that journey I encountered the deep tradition of prayer, spirituality and mysticism, part of the rich heritage we inherit. I learned stories of the very human people of that

tradition that tell us we can know and experience the intimacy of relationship with a very much alive God. I want to share a snippet of one of these stories. It's the account of an event, recorded by Nicholas Motovilov, a merchant in the 17<sup>th</sup> century in Russia. He and Seraphim his spiritual companion and teacher had been discussing how you can be sure you're dwelling in the Holy Spirit, after much talk ...

"Nevertheless," (Motovilov) replied, "I do not understand how I can be certain that I am in the Spirit of God. How can I discern for myself God's true presence in me?"

Then Father Seraphim took me very firmly by the shoulders and said: "We are both in the Spirit of God now, my son. ... Why don't you look at me?"

I replied: "I cannot look ... because your eyes are flashing like lightning. Your face has become brighter than the sun, and my eyes ache with pain."

Father Seraphim said: "Don't be alarmed! Now you yourself have become as bright as I am. You are now in the fullness of the Spirit of God yourself; otherwise you would not be able to see me as I am. But why ... do you not look me in the eyes? Just look, and don't be afraid! [God] is with us!"

After these words I glanced at his face and there came over me an even greater reverent awe. Imagine in the centre of the sun, in the dazzling light of its midday rays, the face of a man talking to you. You see the movement of his lips and the changing expression of his eyes, you hear his voice, you feel someone holding your shoulders; yet you do not see his hands, you do not even see yourself or his figure, but only a blinding light spreading far around for several yards and illumining with its glaring sheen both the snow blanket which covered the forest glade and the snowflakes which besprinkled me and the great Elder. You can imagine the state I was in.

"What do you feel now?" Father Seraphim asked me.

"How lovely," I sighed.

"In what way lovely?"

"So quiet, such "

"What else?"

"Such joy. My heart rings with it."

"What else?"

"Warmth, a glowing warmth."

“What else?”

“A heavenly scent.”

Reflecting the light, Seraphim’s eyes sparkled. “The grace of God is in you and you are in it. If you could only see how your face shines. Will you always remember the grace that has been lavished on you?”

“And me not even a monk.”

“That’s nothing. It is to the [person], not to their state or condition, that God says, ‘Child, give me your heart.’

If we give it, [God] comes.” (Beausobre 1945)

Why recount such story? Because it resonates with transfiguration imagery, so perhaps to suggest God’s breaking in isn’t confined to historical time or text. Perhaps to challenge the ways we, like Peter, want to limit how God may be present.

In the transfiguration story the three figures are paused in that moment, those from the past, stand with those in the present, together looking forward. **We** stand in the feet of those who’ve gone before us. We are because they were. So it is for those who will come after us, whether of blood or interweb of relationship. We reap what’s been sown. We sow what will be reaped. We are foundationally interconnected.

I was taken by Simon Wilson’s words recently, on Matariki morning at Te Mahurehure Marae in Pt Chevalier, he wrote “Most of the young people I was with ... can look forward to ... steep student loans, difficult career prospects and a limited chance at home ownership. They know that health, education, housing, transport, water services, welfare, environmental protections and more suffer disturbing levels of dysfunctions.

They didn’t cause any of that. They inherited a social crisis from their parents and grandparents, who built their new and better world while insisting on low tax and public debt, which led to decades of underfunding.

They also know there’s a good chance the world will become catastrophically dangerous in their lifetimes, because of the climate crisis. They didn’t cause this either, and they didn’t spend the past 30 years refusing to acknowledge it, but they will have to deal with it.

And for many of them, simply by virtue of their race, they and their families are likely to earn less money, become ill across almost every health indicator, including mental health, be arrested and go to prison, be excluded from home ownership and career promotion. And die younger.

In their own country.

If you want to talk about people whose country is no longer theirs, its Maori. If you want to put it in generational terms, it's young people.

But on Saturday morning, they weren't grumpy or bitter or angry.

Love was in the air, because manaakitanga – the mutually reinforcing expression of care – buoyed everyone there.

The event began and ended with karakia. Not because everyone was religious or being forced to pretend they were, but because karakia is a way to invite the kaupapa of respect. It reminds us we are part of something bigger. It asks that we bring our humble and best selves to the place and occasion."<sup>1</sup>

Short term thinking and planning isolates us, causes us to forget, actually I think it's more intentional than that, we do it because it's easier and more immediately gratifying. We'd prefer not to experience the inconvenience, the weight and heft of responsibility for the things we've done, for the way things are. As if the disrupting violence, malaise and dis-ease of enacted social disregard, spiking mental health statistics, fear politics and terrifying climate in crisis realities are nothing to do with us. Someone, somewhere else did it, we "other" these things. Yet they express the way things are. We are a part of the way things are.

Let's not fight, flee or freeze from sense of blame or shame. Rather let's pause, step into the still point moment of transfiguration. Be present – we are because of what's been, it's in us. Who we are is immersed and embraced in warm glow of divine presence. It is in us to express this in the world, for that which is to come flows in and through us. We're not unknowing in the future we choose to enact. We know our choice impacts, reverberates in our world, we can choose. We make a difference. As Susan said on the occasion of Matariki, "what difference do we want to make?"

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<sup>1</sup> NZ Herald, Tuesday July 25, A11