

Transfiguration Sunday

In January 2006 (quite a few years ago now) the Evans family celebrated a variety of birthdays and anniversaries by all going to Egypt. We had a great time. On our trip we climbed Mt Sinai to witness the sunrise. We arrived in the township of St Catherine's the previous evening, and then were summoned to be at the monastery, at the foot of the mountain, for a 3:30am start to our ascent. Some went by camel; we however, walked with a Bedouin guide. After many thousands of years it is a well worn path – but still very steep in places. We reached the summit, just on 6am and were able to watch the sunrise – with about 100 others who obviously had come from all over the world. Needless to say, it was a great, indeed exhilarating experience.

Here we were on the Holy Mountain of scripture where Moses encountered God and received the Ten Commandments, and as we read today, glowed!. Elijah also went there, and there are allusions to this place in the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus, though that mountain is thought to have been in northern Israel. Sinai however, was a special place. It still is a special place.

It didn't take nearly as long to come down the mountain. When we got to the bottom I still was excited – jumping out of my skin: I had to tell someone. So I rang my secretary back in Perth where I was the Western Australian General Secretary. Here I am at the foot of Mt Sinai, on a mobile phone, saying to Ruth – guess what – we just have climbed Mount Sinai. She was suitably unimpressed.

Despite the putdown, it still was a mountain top experience. We have all had them; and I want to suggest today that they are not necessarily all on top of a mountain – though they often they are!

Jesus took Peter James and John to this high mountain. They had this moment of blinding insight - or perhaps profound confirmation – that Jesus was the Christ; they experienced the divine presence of God – as it is said in Hebrew, *shekinah*. Through visions, voices, blinding light and a cloud – all reminiscent of what Moses experienced on Mt Sinai – these disciples came to understand that this Jesus, this Jesus of Nazareth with whom they had been spending their time, was no ordinary itinerant preacher, or wonder worker or teacher. Rather he was up there with the greatest – Moses, Elijah; and as the voice from heaven seemed to be saying – this was in fact God's beloved Son: listen to him. He was the Son of God – the Christ.

Moments of insight however, come in all shapes and forms.

I remember a significant moment of insight in my own life. It came one Saturday morning while working in the backyard. Jean and I had just been married. We were living in Canberra at the time. The yard of this house we had just bought was a mess. We needed some sort of shed. There was this half completed, Tardis like structure in the middle of the yard – so the plan was that we complete it. Put some walls on it and a door. Presto -a shed.

Now my parents were visiting at the time. So my father and I set off that morning to build this shed – every man needs a shed you know! Now, as I look back, I was quite young. Up until then, if there was a similar project at my parent's place – I would be

the labourer, and I would be working to my father's particular plan. However, now, out in the yard, I was asked by my father for the orders; how to cut the wood; where to put the walls, hang the door. I was asked for all of the instructions. I was to show the leadership; he was clearly to be just the labourer.

At this point I had this blinding flash – things were now different. I was not on a mountain top, no heavenly voice, no cloud, but that morning came a great understanding as to who I now was. I was accepted by my father as a partner in this task. I was not just someone's child. There were new relationships in the family now. . . all because I had to issue orders with regard to the building of a garden shed. If you want to take the transfiguration analogy a little further – the people involved – my father, myself, others in the family, were the same at the start as at the end; **but** we had been transformed into having a different relationship, a different understanding of who we each were . . . no longer just father and son, but partners in life. In the transfiguration story, something similar happened for the disciples. The voices, the vision, the bright light – the insight into who Jesus was – was a moment of blinding insight; one of awe, even terror. When it was all over though, Luke simply says: 'Jesus was found alone'. Life was back to normal, and they had to get on with living – off the mountain. The high, the intense spiritual moment – did not remain. But their relationship with Jesus was forever changed.

Indeed this is a difficult story for our modern scientific mind, but let us look beyond that and see if there is any pattern or learning we may take from the story.

To begin with, God, in God's own time will, address you: and you may experience *shekinah* – the divine presence; a deep spiritual intensity; of being strangely warmed, an epiphany, whatever. It can be mundane - like with my shed; it can be all singing and dancing; but what else is there?

First of all, the disciples experienced a sense of awe; of fear or falling on one's face in the presence of God. This was a holy moment – an encounter with the other. It was truly awesome. I think within our UCA tradition, and with our Australian heritage, we get a little afraid of feelings. We are cerebral and quickly can dismiss such a response as being emotional – or too emotional. But there are times when there is a tear in the eye, a tingle on the arms, hairs standing up on the back of your neck, we can experience a profound sense of peace, of release. Don't always expect emotions to be stirred, but it can happen.

True, on the other hand, we can be too emotional. We want our emotional high to happen again, and again and again. The Church in the past, and even today wants to create these emotional highs. It built magnificent awe-inspiring cathedrals, it has used music to lift the spirits and reach another plane – a window into heaven. Mass evangelists are not past using techniques that tinker, some might say manipulate, our emotions and feelings. Just be careful I would say. We can be swept off our feet.

A second thing to note and this is more likely to be our response, even failing, as good Uniting Church people, and that is to turn some the great moment in history, of particular insight, into some ritual; worse, an empty ritual. In the story of the transfiguration this was the temptation the disciples who were with Jesus on that occasion. The disciples wanted to enshrine – literally – build a shrine around this moment with a memorial, some structure, that would capture what they experienced. Jesus, Moses and Elijah could have their own shrines – everyone would then know

what had happened on this high mountain. Their moment of encounter would be remembered. Life and the depth of life would not continue back on the plain – the great experiences were up there on the mountain. That is where the pilgrims would have to go.

We do this with the high feasts of the Christian year – society certainly has done that with some of our festivals like Christmas and Easter. All the wonder and amazement of God's encounter with us in Christ's death on the cross or in the birth of Jesus, is sucked out, and we are left with a hollow shell; worse, a commercial opportunity, and we just follow a hollow ritual.

The classic example, indeed it is what we will celebrate today – this sacrament of Holy Communion. Jesus saw our need to be reminded of God's love for us all, of our restored relationship with God - of his death on the cross. We need to re-enact that spiritual insight, breathe that spiritual reality, taste that fact that God loves us. We do this in the context of a meal – using the most familiar and ordinary of things – bread and wine. So I am sure you immediately recall particular services of Holy Communion which you have celebrated and have been veritably touched by God – occasions when you saw afresh God's love for you – of God's presence with you, of God's peace. The meal was truly food for your journey of life. But I am sure there have been other many other times when communion has just descended into empty ritual . . . and not for you a fresh encounter with the risen Christ. A ritual with no present, even future, significance – just a recollection of the past, and a perfunctory one at that.

The disciples wanted booths, dwellings, literally tents – the tent of the tabernacle containing the ark of the covenant: the presence of God. Jesus however, didn't want some monument to the past; he wanted them in time to have through the power of the Spirit, his presence with them all the time. They themselves were to be his presence in the world.

Finally, this also explains that puzzling feature from this story of the transfiguration as to why the disciples chose to tell no one. In the context of heightened emotions, I think this is good wisdom to be careful as to what you may say. Your vision, your experience just may not be right – you may not **yet** have the whole story – you may need time to reflect. Your aha moment may not be wrong in itself, but there may be more to it as well. So here in this story, in fact eight days prior to going up this mountain, Jesus had told his disciples he would die, be killed. There was not just going to be divine fireworks, the glory, there was also to be the selfless love, the service, the death because of others. The mountaintop and the cross would reveal who Jesus is in all his fullness. The mountain top was indeed not the whole story.

So in conclusion:

- be open to God addressing you;
- it may occur when you least expect it and in very ordinary ways;
- be careful the experience is indeed an epiphany and you are not being carried away with emotion;
- respond appropriately - resist the temptation to freeze or recreate that time;
- and, if it is a mountain top experience, you will live out a transformed life.