

*a taste of glory*  
 a sermon preached on the  
*last sunday before lent*

7 February 2016

at

*st john's*

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

*by dr muriel porter*

The lections: Exodus 34: 29-35; Psalm 99; 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2; Luke 9:28-36

Last Sunday we celebrated Candlemas, the lovely feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple. As we noted then, that feast is the hinge in the Christian Year, between the feast of Christmas and the journey to the Cross. It is the pivotal point from which we begin, as the Vicar told us last week, to make our journey from crib to font, from womb to tomb.

Today, the last Sunday after the Epiphany feast, the last before Lent, is another kind of hinge – a last dazzling experience of epiphany, or revelation, before we head into the journey of suffering. We stand with Jesus on the mountain top, like the disciples struck with awe and fear, as we see him transfigured in a blaze of glorious light – as we hear the voice proclaiming that he is indeed the Chosen Son. We contemplate Jesus, the Son of God, revealed in the fullness of his glory.

This mountain top experience is not all sweetness and light for the disciples, however. They are awe-struck, but quite confused. Poor bumbling Peter wants to set the experience in concrete, suggesting building dwellings for Jesus and the prophets Moses and Elijah who had appeared with him. It is very understandable – we all want to hold fast to the great illuminating experiences of our lives. But we cannot, anymore than Peter could. The Gospel tells us quite plainly that Peter did not know what he was saying!

When it was all over – when the ethereal visitors had left and the cloud had disappeared and Jesus' face and clothes were no longer dazzling – we are told “they kept silent”. They told no one of what they had seen, at least not until after the resurrection, when they understand better just what they had once witnessed on the mountain top. Clearly their silence shows that as they left the mountain they had at least some intimation that the other side of this “glory” was the road to suffering. That is why the Transfiguration is essential for us to contemplate on the Sunday before Ash Wednesday. As Professor Dorothy Lee has put it, Luke shows the Transfiguration as symbolically empowering Jesus “to confront his fate through prayer, leading his disciples on the journey of death to life, a grim journey that will finally embrace them with glory”.<sup>1</sup>

At Christmas, in celebrating the Incarnation, the coming of God among us as one of us, we heard the angels singing of peace on earth and goodwill to all people as the consequence of this birth. More than 2,000 years later, it doesn't feel much like it, does it?

Around the world wars and rumours of war continue to convulse us. People's homes and lives are being bombed out of existence in Syria; refugees drown as they desperately try to reach safety. There are more people now on the move, forced into exile from their homelands, than was the case at the end of the Second World War.

We don't have to look overseas. Look what we have been confronted with in our own country just this past week. Did you see the photos of those babies – born in this country – now facing imminent deportation back to the hell hole that is Nauru? Thirty-seven of them, plus some older children, their parents and other adults: 267 people in all.

There is community outrage, and thankfully, our church has raised its voice in anguish as well. The Primate, our own Archbishop, has called on the Prime Minister to “step up with something that changes that narrative” of using punitive measures like detention as a

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<sup>1</sup> Dorothy Lee, *Transfiguration*, Continuum, London and New York, 2004, pp.65,66

form of deterrence. “It’s a very good time for us to recast our opinions about this and for the Prime Minister to be able to step forward and say no this is not good enough, these children, these babies are not going to be sent to Nauru”.<sup>2</sup> Cathedrals, parish churches, and churches from other denominations around the country are opening their doors to offer sanctuary to these people.

Sadly, so far we do not seem to have made any headway. Most politicians fearful of losing votes do not seem to be listening. The Vicar has used a sentence from last Thursday’s *Age* on the front page of this week’s *Contact*: “Prime Minister [Malcolm Turnbull] has vowed the government’s hardline border stance is unshakable after the High Court ruled offshore detention was lawful”.<sup>3</sup> David’s response is graphic: “Jesus wept”.<sup>4</sup> As have many of us.

In making a stand against the hardline thinking that is keeping vulnerable people in a situation akin to a concentration camp, the Christian Church is living the Gospel of Transfiguration. It is reflecting the shining light of Christ into this diabolical and shameful darkness.

All this makes us starkly aware that we are living in an in-between time. The world seems not to have heard the angels’ song, and sin and grief and suffering continue unabated. It is sometimes hard to believe that Jesus’s resurrection inaugurated a new creation. “Yet the Word *is* becoming flesh in the dark abyss of time and space, whether we ‘feel it’ or not”.<sup>5</sup>

As we prepare to enter the season of Lent, that serious time of reflection and prayer as we journey towards the Cross, the Transfiguration offers us a powerful guide. Notice that it happens when Jesus and his disciples are *praying*. As Melbourne Biblical scholar Brendan Byrne points out, again and again in Scripture “prayer forms the context for God’s intervention”.<sup>6</sup> And that though the disciples were longing for sleep, they managed to stay awake. So we need to resolve, perhaps for this Lent at least, to be faithful in prayer and, as in Advent, to be alert and awake so that we might see the glory of God breaking through the darkness, empowering us to witness to the Gospel.

The Transfiguration shines brightly today to encourage us as we head for Ash Wednesday. To remind us that the Word became, becomes, flesh; that the new creation is with us even now.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://tma.melbourneanglican.org.au/news/Freier-PM-detention-040216>

<sup>3</sup> [theage.digitaleditions.com.au/olive/ode/ageweb/](http://theage.digitaleditions.com.au/olive/ode/ageweb/)

<sup>4</sup> John 11:35

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.stjohnscamberwell.org.au/sites/default/files/inline/files/24\\_12\\_2015.pdf](http://www.stjohnscamberwell.org.au/sites/default/files/inline/files/24_12_2015.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Brendan Byrne, *The hospitality of God: a reading of Luke’s Gospel*, rev.ed. Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 2015, p.31