

metamorphosis
a sermon preached on the
last sunday before lent
26 February 2017
at
st john's
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
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the lections: Exodus 24:12-18; Ps 2; 2 Peter 1:16-21; Matthew 17:1-9

Today's very familiar transfiguration story takes place, according to Matthew, "six days later".¹ Six days *later*? Later than *what*? What happened six days earlier? Why is this story of transfiguration – involving only the three closest disciples, taken aside, up a very high mountain, for an intense spiritual experience – connected to something that happened six days earlier?

To understand the meaning of the transfiguration it is necessary to reflect on the second half of chapter 16 of Matthew's gospel. Crowds² have been left behind, leaving just disciples and interrogating religious authorities gathered around Jesus.³ Then Jesus has separated himself further, taking the disciples away from Pharisees and Sadducees, going by boat to the other side of the lake.⁴ In the cosmopolitan Gentile district of Caesarea – well away from the religious purity – Jesus asks them the famous question, "Who do people say that I am?"⁵ The disciples offer mere formula answers.⁶ Jesus presses them; "But who *you* say that I am?"⁷ Simon Peter utters his timeless spiritual intuition: "You are the *Christos*, the Son of the Living God!"⁸ Peter is 'rewarded' for this moment of insight with the promise of his spiritual leadership of the church.

But then, just when it all seems suitably triumphal and glorious and ready-made for a media conference, comes Jesus' devastating news: "From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised".⁹ Peter explodes, speaking for every person, then and since: "God forbid it, Lord. This must never happen to you!"¹⁰ Prompting arguably the harshest words Jesus ever spoke to anyone: "Get behind me Satan! You are a stumbling block to me."¹¹

This heart-wrenching dialogue between friends is the preparation for what many consider to be the absolute centre of the gospel, the summation of what *evangelion* actually means, the essence of initiation into discipleship in Christ: "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."¹²

According to the narrative framework of Matthew's gospel, the disciples are given six days to contemplate this astonishing teaching. Six days: the number of days during which God created the heavens and the earth. On the seventh day, the Sabbath, "Jesus took with him Peter and James and John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves".¹³

This Sabbath encounter between heaven and earth – between overshadowing cloud and terrified mortals, God and humankind, Father and Son, ancient prophets and fledgling disciples, where the 'appearance of the glory of the LORD [which is] like a devouring fire'¹⁴ – transfigures reality. The Greek word is *μετεμορφωθη* *metemorphōthē*; instantly recognisable to anyone who has ever witnessed close-up the miracle of what happens inside cocoons.

In Christchurch Judy and I marvelled annually at the miraculous metamorphosis of dozens of Monarch butterflies in the swan plants outside our lounge room; spending hours in transfixed and wondrous gaze, as caterpillars 'voluntarily' imprisoned themselves into their tight cocoons, then with even greater marvelling as those cocoons, seemingly dead things, themselves transformed in shape and colour, finally being broken open by the ever-breathtaking sight of the emerging Monarch butterfly.

1 Matthew 17:1 Also Mark 9:2

2 Matthew 15:32-38

3 Matthew 15:39-16:4

4 Matthew 16:5

5 Matthew 16:13

6 Matthew 16:14

7 Matthew 16:15

8 Matthew 16:16

9 Matthew 16:21

10 Matthew 16:22

11 Matthew 16:23

12 Matthew 16:25

13 Matthew 17:1

14 Exodus 24:17

We know from biological science that inside the cocoon the caterpillar literally dissolves, nothing of its shape or form remains, but just a kind of molecular soup. And that, somehow, from that primeval soup all the molecules rearrange into a form, literally the *morphē*, into a living thing that could not be more different from the precursor to that seemingly-dead soup!

So here's the thing... The metamorphosis required by the gospel of Christ involves a complete dissolution of our form and shape; that is, of everything we have held to be the basis of our life. Remember, from the point of view of the caterpillar, what takes place in the cocoon is tantamount to death; just as from the point of view of Jesus, what takes place on the cross and in the grave is complete dissolution of being.

This is no child's play! This is a very hard teaching for us; it's contrary to all our usual assumptions and expectations. And that's what makes it 'gospel'.

So what the disciples are shown in graphic supra-spiritual encounter on the high mountain is what they have been taught in words: "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it". The caterpillar that attempts to cling onto its caterpillar form loses its life. The caterpillar that 'consents' to losing its form as caterpillar – and thus dies to itself, becoming nothing other than molecular soup – 'finds' life! Little wonder that butterflies have long been a resurrection symbol.

The one who voluntarily loses their life is rewarded by the divine voice: "This is my Son/Daughter, the Beloved!"¹⁵ Losing life in order to 'find' it is the meaning of transfiguration. The disciples are understandably overwhelmed by this; mirroring Peter's chapter 16 protest, this time in his seemingly reasonable but ultimately regressive attempt to concretise the encounter.¹⁶

Peter's suggestion of building tents is like the caterpillar which refuses to be dissolved. The disciples must, like the Beloved Son to whom they are to listen,¹⁷ voluntarily accept dissolution of their identity.

This is the meaning of *descending*, going down the mountain, and remaining silent "about the vision until after the Human One has been raised from the dead",¹⁸ of losing one's life in order to find it. Only after Jesus' dissolution, *and their own in fact*, will disciples understand the meaning of the vision.

That's a foundational spiritual principle; violated every time we attempt to commodify and package and 'market' religious ideas as things to be sold in the marketplace. The transfiguration reminds us that our experience of spiritual high must be contained within and interpreted through our spiritual dying; and that this is the way to true life.

Today's fire – the burning of last year's palm crosses – produces ash, seemingly 'dead', which in fact is the very means by which we undergo the spiritual metamorphosis of the Lenten pilgrimage.

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¹⁵ Matthew 17:5

¹⁶ Matthew 17:4

¹⁷ Matthew 17:5

¹⁸ Matthew 17:9