**6th March 2011**

**Matthew 17:1-9**

The last couple of weeks have brought us a full plate of pictures that will be ingrained in the annals of history. Images from Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and New Zealand. I sent a message to Ken Wall the minister from the Presbyterian church of New Zealand, with whom I did a summer exchange last year, expressing our shock and sympathy to all the folks there. When you see pictures of churches completely demolished by the quake it makes ones floor problems seem trivial in comparison.

Events in Libya are foremost on our screens at the moment. If would be laughable when you see pictures of Colonel Gaddafi, speaking to his people from the back seat of an golf buggy holding a white umbrella if it wasn’t so deadly serious. Before that were the images from Cairo's Tahrir Square?

One of the pictures I saw of the Egyptian crisis was a human ring of ordinary men and women standing guard around the Cairo Museum, making a barrier of bodies all the way around the perimeter of the building. Word had spread that the night before a small but clumsy gang of looters had broken into the museum, stealing some objects, stupidly destroying others.

The youthful crowds of protestors responded by rushing to protect the building and the priceless items it housed. Why did they do this? It is doubtful there were very many worshipers of Amon Ra or any of the other ancient Egyptian gods and pharaohs that those museum relics celebrate. The Egyptian people did not rally simply around religious artefacts. They were protecting their own history, the stories and symbols of who they were as a people, of where they had been, and what they had done. They were guarding their historic identity. Every item in that museum had its own special "provenance," its own place in the story of their world. That provenance was the treasure they banded together to protect.

Any "Antiques Roadshow" addicts here? If you've ever seen just one episode, you know that it is the "provenance," the verifiable stories of the persons who interacted with the items brought in, that makes an item valuable or a possession priceless. An antique gold ring is literally "worth its weight in gold." But an antique gold ring given to your great grandmother by Pablo Picasso as a "thank you" for doing such a good job cleaning his studio? That's called "provenance," and with such a "provenance" that gold ring is worth much, much more than it's weight in gold. It is the gold ring's story that adds value and luster to a simple piece of jewelry.

What's your story? What's your provenance? God established Jesus' "provenance" at his baptism and then repeated it again at his Transfiguration. But each of us has our own "faith provenance" that we need to know and share and celebrate.

What is your "provenance story"?

What is the provenance of your life of faith?

What experiences have you had and who have you encountered that made your own faith "priceless."

This week's gospel text is Matthew's version of Jesus' provenance, the pivotal "transfiguration" event that marks the beginning of a new phase in Jesus' mission and ministry. From now on he will set his face to go towards Jerusalem. He will face conflict, suffering, torture and death. The road ahead will be tough. The transfiguration gives a glimpse of another reality beyond all that. At the end of this experience Jesus tells Peter, James and John, the ones who went up the mountain with him, to tell no one until the son of Man is raised from the dead. The transfiguration is like a preview of what’s to come.

It is the biblical equivalent of Friday night at your local cinema and watching the trailers for the soon to be released films. It is a preview of what it would be for Christ in the resurrection. Jesus' face shines like the sun, Matthew tells us, and his clothes become dazzling white. Jesus is glorified right before the very eyes of Peter, James, and John as he communes with Moses and Elijah, two individuals from the Old testament who both endured rejection by the people, but had support from God..

Previews, unfortunately, don't last long by their very nature. If they did, they wouldn't be called "previews." They would be full-length movies. But then again, this is one of the Bible's true mountaintop experiences, and as we all know, mountaintop experiences don't last very long. Every once in awhile a moment comes along that we wish we could freeze for all eternity. It's the kind of experience that reaches down into the marrow of our bones and touches us with a special feeling. We wish it would last forever, but it doesn't.

When you go on holiday sometimes you don’t want to leave. You want to stay there. Last week I was on Lindisfarne, Holy Island in Northumbria. I always enjoy a visit there and always would like to stay longer.

I think Peter would understand that. He wants to put up some tents perhaps to prolong the experience or make a fitting memorial. I think that whatever else happened in Peter's life - and we have an awful lot of it recorded - he may have given it all up to go back and relive the moment. It is perfectly understandable when the going gets tough to wish you were somewhere else. To drift back to the mountain top experiences of your life. That is perfectly natural and arguably beneficial. Life throws all sorts at us. Some good, some bad. We look back and think of the good times – those are precious times. Cherish them. They are a blessings to sustain you in the hard times.

How significant was it for Jesus to hear these words of affirmation and love ‘this is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased’ at the start of his ministry as he was baptised and then now, before he makes his way to the cross. Surely those moments sustained him. When everyone else seemed against him, when he was reviled and scorned and crucified, did he succumb to their taunts and lies, did he feel worthless even deserving of suffering and punishment? Surely he kept sight of that mountaintop experience, surely he kept alive in his heart those words ‘you are loved, I take delight in you’.

You may look back and think of the hard times, the places of pain and failure. When some people do this they can become overwhelmed with guilt and self loathing. The disciples in this story fell on their faces and were terrified at what they experienced of the transfiguration of Jesus. Perhaps, as often happens in scripture when individuals stand on holy ground they are struck down by an awareness of their own sense of unworthiness and failure in contrast to the holiness of the one they face. Matthew says that Jesus came and touched those terrified disciples and said ‘Rise and have no fear’ and when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus. Can you look back and see, even in the hard times, the presence of Christ? Can you ,with the power of the Holy Spirit, learn and grow through those times so that they no longer have a hold on you, that you can rise up and have no fear?’

Life is humbling. Whether the holy moments of ecstasy, the mountain top experiences, or the hard times in the valleys.

In the summer of 1941, Sergeant James Allen Ward was awarded the Victoria Cross for climbing out onto the wing of his Wellington bomber at 13,000 feet above ground to extinguish a fire in the starboard engine. Secured only by a rope around his waist, he managed to smother the fire and return along the wing to the aircraft's cabin. Winston Churchill, an admirer as well as a performer of swashbuckling exploits, summoned the shy New Zealander to 10 Downing Street. Ward, struck dumb with awe in Churchill's presence, was unable to answer the prime minister's questions. Churchill surveyed the unhappy hero with some compassion.

"You must feel very humble and awkward in my presence," he said,

"Yes, Sir," managed Ward.

"Then you can imagine how humble and awkward I feel in yours," returned Churchill.

Churchill knew he was in the presence of a real hero. So did the disciples. In fact, they knew they were in the presence of someone whose significance went beyond celebrity, even beyond heroic. He was their Lord, their Master, their King. If we are wise, he will be our Lord, our Master, our King. If we are wise, Christ will be our Hero, too.

Like the Egyptians around the Cairo museum, protecting their memories and identity, even in the rough times may we glimpse something of Christ’s majesty, even in the hard times may we glimpse something of the greater picture of reality and our calling as Christians, the hope of resurrection, the deep awareness that we are loved, that God delights in us. Even though we may let go of him he will not let go of us. How humbling and awesome is that?

Prayer from New Zealand – a service of Solidarity with Christchurch.

Eternal God, who loves us with an everlasting love,
and can turn the shadow of death into the morning;

help us now as we wait upon you.

In the silence of this hour speak to us of eternal things,
that we may have hope,
and be lifted above our darkness and distress
 into the light and peace of your presence;

through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

**Contemporary service**

A brilliant magician was performing on an ocean liner. But every time he did a trick, the Captain's parrot would yell, "It's a trick. He's a phony. That's not magic." Then one evening during a storm, the ship sank while the magician was performing. The parrot and the magician ended up in the same lifeboat. For several days they just glared at each other, neither saying a word to the other. Finally the parrot said, "OK, I give up. What did you do with the ship?"

The parrot couldn't explain that last trick! It was too much to comprehend, even for a smart parrot. Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters-one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." Scholars over the years have tried to explain what in the world Peter meant by this suggestion. But, I think trying to find meaning to these words is pointless. It's simply the way Matthew explains: Peter was frightened and he just said the first thing that came to into his head. He simply could not comprehend what was happening.

In life, moments occur that are incomprehensible. The birth of one's own child is one of those moments. The loss of a loved one is one of those moments. We have sent tumultuous events in places like Egypt and Tunisia and Libya, we have seen devastating disasters like the earthquake in new Zealand. There are mountaintop and valley moments throughout life. We are never ready for them. They arrive unannounced changing us in irreversible ways.

Jesus was changed by his experience of transfiguration. The transfiguration spoke of a different reality. Children's stories are full of characters who move back and forth between different realms of reality. Take Cinderella, for example. You know the story of four mice pulling a pumpkin, whisking Cinderella away from poverty into an exalted moment of acceptance and glory. In one transforming moment, the servant is transformed into the queen of the ball. Suddenly, everyone can see Cinderella's beauty and worth. Or take the story of The Lion King, where Simba, a young lion cub, makes a series of selfish choices that lead to his father's death. He has to flee. After a long exile, he is challenged to return. While wrestling with the decision, he sees in a pond his own image, mysteriously transfigured into the image of his deceased father. In that moment, he sees the purpose of his life and discovers the courage to return. Or take Beauty and the Beast, where the beast is transformed by love back into a prince.

In these stories, reality is seen in a whole new way. As for the disciples, during these very mysterious moments on the mountain, the one they had followed up the mountain was transfigured before them.

The transfiguration gives a glimpse of another reality. At the end of this experience Jesus tells Peter, James and John, the ones who went up the mountain with him, to tell no one until the son of Man is raised from the dead. The transfiguration is like a preview of what’s to come.

It is the biblical equivalent of Friday night at your local cinema and watching the trailers for the soon to be released films. It is a preview of what it would be for Christ in the resurrection. Jesus' face shines like the sun, Matthew tells us, and his clothes become dazzling white. From now in Matthew’s gospel Jesus will make his way to the cross and face conflict, suffering torture and death. He is glorified next to Moses and Elijah, two individuals from the Old testament who both endured rejection by the people, but had support from God..

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A young woman made an announcement one morning to her co-workers, "My honeymoon is over and I am so relieved. Now we can get on with our marriage." That's the way it is with our mountaintop experiences. We can't live there forever. The light is too bright, the pace too frantic, and the demands too great. It is a relief to return to normal lives where we can be ourselves and let others be themselves, but that doesn't mean the honeymoon is forgotten. Just because we don't live on the mountain all the time doesn't mean we forget what happened on the mountain.

I think Peter would understand that. He wants to put up some tents perhaps to prolong the experience or make a fitting memorial. I think that whatever else happened in Peter's life - and we have an awful lot of it recorded - he may have given it all up to go back and relive the moment. It is perfectly understandable when the going gets tough to wish you were somewhere else. To drift back to the mountain top experiences of your life. That is perfectly natural and arguably beneficial. Life throws all sorts at us. Some good, some bad. We look back and think of the good times – those are precious times. Cherish them. They are a blessings to sustain you in the hard times.

How significant was it for Jesus to hear these words of affirmation and love ‘this is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased’ at the start of his ministry as he was baptised and then now, before he makes his way to the cross. Surely those moments sustained him. When everyone else seemed against him, when he was reviled and scorned and crucified, did he succumb to their taunts and lies, did he feel worthless even deserving of suffering and punishment? Surely he kept sight of that mountaintop experience, surely he kept alive in his heart those words ‘you are loved, I take delight in you’.

You may look back and think of the hard times, the places of pain and failure. When some people do this they can become paralysed by guilt - or just in denial. Peter didn’t know what to do at the transfiguration so suggested he built some tents – its a bizarre suggestion – he wanted to keep busy. Some people in a crisis just keep on doing what they have always done – sometimes those habits keep them going – sometimes they are just in denial and not facing up to the issues at hand. Peter may be trying to domesticate God – to enclose this experience into something he can control and understand so that God and life is predictable.

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Experiences and memories can be transfigured. Laurel A. Dykstra, a scripture and justice educator living in Vancouver, British Columbia, wrote the following in an article for Sojourners Magazine:

"My first night at Guadalupe House, a Catholic Worker "transition house" where I spent nearly 10 years, I sat at the wobbly-legged table amid a circle of men's faces, black and brown and white, and looked at the peeling linoleum, tattered sheer yellow curtains, broken couches, and roach-filled corners. I had never seen a place so ugly. After a week of hospitality, laughter, community, and connection, I sat in the same seat and caught myself thinking, 'What a kind and homely room this is.' Transfigured.

"So I wonder: In Matthew's story of the mountain, was it Jesus who changed or was it that John, James, and Peter could now see the face of God shining in the man they knew? Did the thin air and the elevated perspective contribute to their clarity of vision? When they came down from the mountaintop, did they take their new capacity to see into the low places and crowded city streets? Can we? And when we see the face of God shining through those who are familiar to us, do we truly, deeply listen to them?"

Life is humbling. Whether the holy moments of ecstasy, the mountain top experiences, or the hard times in the valleys, can we protect those memories and identity. Even in the rough times may we glimpse something of Christ’s majesty, even in the hard times may we glimpse something of the greater picture of reality and our calling as Christians, the hope of resurrection, the deep awareness that we are loved, that God delights in us. Even though we may let go of him he will not let go of us. How humbling and awesome is that?

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In the silence of this hour speak to us of eternal things,
that we may have hope,
and be lifted above our darkness and distress
 into the light and peace of your presence;

through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.