

George Pell and the Transfiguration

Sermon at St Philip's, O'Connor, Sunday 3 March 2019

The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell

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

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

This week past we've seen a different kind of transfiguration taking place, a more typical, more familiar kind than the one we meet in today's gospel. We saw it outside the County Court in Melbourne, and everywhere in the media. Cardinal George Pell's conviction was made public. And although commentators as far apart on the political spectrum as Andrew Bolt and Father Frank Brennan agreed that sexual assault in an open Cathedral vestry in the midst of a major public event seems unlikely, nevertheless the mob has formed and Cardinal Pell's transfiguration had begun.

Before this week he was an unflinching company man, a most unsympathetic media performer, a bishop plainly on the spectrum when it came to pastoral ability, and a brutal ideologue when it came to sexuality. He was a public figure widely unloved, and a focus for the understandable anger of sex abuse victims. But now listen to the mob: "you're a monster, Pell"; "I hope you rot in hell". See the sort

of transfiguration that's under way? See the upping of the ante, as an admittedly unpopular figure convicted on what seems like less-than-convincing grounds is turned into a monster, and cursed as the repository of all evil, with his imprisonment greeted by unconcealed delight. You can imagine what will be said if the Court of Appeal overturns this conviction; suddenly, today's rejoicing in justice done will be replaced by angry shouts of justice denied, because almost by definition no monster can ever be acquitted.

We saw a similar transfiguration in our parliament recently, and in the media, during debate over the Kerry Phelp's bill that gave doctors more say in getting sick people off Nauru and Manus Island. And suddenly that whole mixed bag of suffering humanity, that amalgam of ordinary people, both good and bad, was transfigured into a horde of murderers, rapists and terrorists by the government. This is because illegal immigrants have become the sum of all fears in many Western countries today, being readily demonised—monsterised—as a way of coping with our own sense of vulnerability.

In both cases—Cardinal Pell and the asylum seekers—we encounter what the New Testament calls scandal. It manifests as an obsession with other people as wrongdoers, and hence with marking ourselves off from these others in the clearest possible terms. This is a situation in which cooler heads are unlikely to prevail, because it's so

easy to get caught up in the mudslinging, in the desire to punish. This is the transfiguring logic of the mob. We see it in the street, in the parliament, on social media, in the righteous corridors of the ABC, and wherever our own fears and insecurities can find an easy target.

Jesus himself was the cause of scandal like this. He scandalised the religious authorities, who saw him as a threat to their power, and he scandalised the disciples, because he talked about his coming death and he refused to be the wrathful saviour that many were looking for. And so in time Jesus was transfigured, too, by this same universal, sinful logic, into a despised, rejected, spat upon, shamed and excluded figure of contempt, not only judicially murdered but destroyed on every level of tragic human experience.

Yet, friends, today in our Gospel we're drawn into a different transfiguration—one that comes from God, not from human fear, rivalry, and scandal. The mountaintop, the cloud that recalls our reading from Exodus, and the presence of God's two great messengers, who were themselves vehicles of God's glory in the Old Testament, all mark this out as a God event. But what a strange theme then develops. Jesus talks with Moses and Elijah about his coming departure—that is, his death—and what he'll accomplish in the city of destiny. The world will pour out its worst on Jesus and he'll submit to it all, because only thus can humanity wake up to

what's going on. This revelation starts in God's declaration at Jesus' baptism, and gathers steam here in the transfiguration gospel with its foretaste of God's glory in the risen Jesus Christ. I say that what we're seeing is God's verdict on all our demonising and monsterising; God's judgement on all our judgemental violence. And what this alternative transfiguration entails is vindication for the victim; it exposes our normal way of preserving our worth and our certainties at the expense of others who we monsterise.

Peter doesn't quite get it of course, he never does. He thinks that this is just one more festival of booths, one more iteration of the old cycle in which Israel is recalled to God's service. Instead, this is a breakthrough moment, with Moses and Elijah the first to hear how God is now fulfilling their story and taking it viral.

So as we gather here in the Eucharist today, at the end of this Epiphany season, with the eyes of faith we see Jesus transfigured in our midst by the glory of God and revealed as the chosen one, as God with us. And what's more, with Jesus, we know ourselves as undergoing transfiguration in the same way by the Holy Spirit—from one degree of glory to another, as Paul reminds us in our Epistle today.

Friends, this mystical, sacramental reality places demands on us in the real world, where news is made, where attitudes harden, and where a calm, non-scandalised perspective can do a lot of good. Our Christian vocation in a world where people are transfigured into monsters to settle the mob and to discharge its fears is to be well grounded in what real transfiguration looks like. It's to claim our share in Jesus' transfigured glory by standing alongside him in solidarity with all the victims of self-righteous scapegoating violence.

The Lord be with you ...