

The Point of Being a Christian

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Sunday 19 February — The Transfiguration

Reverend Martin Johnson

Exodus 24.12-18; Psalm 2; 2 Peter 1.16-21; Matthew 17.1-9.

Transfiguration 2023

There is no doubt that at some stage, perhaps as recently as this morning, you have thought to yourself: 'What's the point... I think I'll stay in bed!' Perhaps that feeling is most profoundly felt on Sundays! I'm sure we've all heard of the person complaining to their spouse: 'Do I really have to church this morning?' 'Yes dear, you do; you're the Bishop of the Diocese.' The point is that there is a point, going to church is not pointless.

At the turn of the second century, the Christian communities were in a deal of turmoil. Many were wondering whether there was indeed a point to it all. Yes, it's true, there is nothing new under the Sun! Remember there were no creeds, no calendar, no set forms of worship, the canon of scripture had not been settled. So, there were a wide range of writings and an even wider range of interpretation. There were numerous competing groups each with its own ideas, some of them extreme. Yes, nothing new! Importantly, Christ had not returned—not in way that many believed he would. This left many in these new Christian communities in a kind of limbo. This is almost certainly the context of 2 Peter, and we heard that in the passage this morning.

What eventually would occur would be the extraordinary process of the setting down of authoritative scripture, the creation of the Bible as we know it today. Doctrines would be established — the nature of God, of Christ, of the Church and of humankind — through the Ecumenical councils of the Church. Perhaps the one we know best is the Council of Nicaea. The Transfiguration, that great event that we celebrate today—the event that literally and theologically is at the heart of the three gospels Matthew, Mark, and Luke—became a key text in helping the early Church grapple with the issues of its day; it remains a key text for us too, those of who wonder, 'what is the point?'

I recall reading of a Dominican Friar speaking to group of lay folk—this is in modern times. They were doing their own wondering 'what is the point?' He took some butchers' paper and drew a small square in the corner. 'In that square are the commandments.' And he asked, 'Is the point?' Many said yes. Then he drew a much larger square which covered the butchers' paper and incorporated the smaller square. 'This is the point; this is what God is interested in . . . freedom.'

In the creation of the canon and doctrine, in the creation of forms of worship, the early Church under the inspiration of the Spirit was given the freedom to explore and discover the faith. I liken it to a child who is given room to grow by loving parents. Boundaries are set and are clearly marked, but there is room to learn and explore, and ultimately to know the love and the freedom that comes with faith.

For the ancient Jewish people 'the law and the prophets' were a kind of mantra. Today we see them present in the Transfiguration vision in Moses and Elijah. Jesus is in the middle, he too embodies the two elements of law and prophets, but they don't bind him, they are not a burden. They are a source of liberation, of freedom. At the heart of Matthew's gospel, a gospel whose first hearers were Jewish, is a lifting of burdens.

Paul speaks of this Transfiguration or metamorphosis (the literal translation) in a breathtaking

vision: ‘all of us,’ he writes, ‘with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.’ We too are called to be transformed. We won’t undergo a metamorphosis; our transformation is a gradual one. The point is that as Christian pilgrims we are journeying folk and the mark of us is a particular kind of freedom. Poor old Peter wants to try and capture the event; I think we all would. But this isn’t a one-off event in history. This is the beginning of journey, a journey of liberation.

What does this look like? That is not always easy. The philosopher Emmanuel Kant once wrote ‘Freedom cannot be explained, only defended.’ Perhaps that says something about our predicament. Clearly, we need to model a lifestyle that says there is a point to our lives. We might call this ‘a missional spirituality’. The gospel invites us to a liberty and happiness which should swim against the expectations of our culture; it should be noticeable. For, although many modern folk think they are free, many clearly are not. It strikes me that many folk have little freedom in their lives, for many different reasons—and many of course are held captive by their religious beliefs. We need to model the freedom that is at the heart of our faith.

So, I ask again, what does this look like? It doesn’t look like the fixed smile of certainty. I think we all have an idea what looks like. If we were to start again with the transfigured Jesus: here is God who has come among us to die—the freedom to be vulnerable. The disciples cannot even begin to understand this freedom. I doubt that we can. ‘Get up and do not be afraid.’ Jesus says to the disciples . . . to us. The first thing that should be noticed is that we are not afraid.

Jesus chose to be, for us, a victim: ‘Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.’ This is not our path. We don’t choose to be victims. We must see beyond that. But we must stand alongside those that are victims. Our freedom is most clearly seen when we stand alongside those who are clearly not free. No one would choose poor mental health, addiction, homelessness. They might begin with choices which set them on a certain path but, again, those choices are often made in circumstances we can barely grasp. Jesus in his ministry demonstrates a freedom to come alongside all manner of folk who are marginalized, discriminated against.

What is the point? The point is made here at the Eucharist. The offering of ourselves, our souls and bodies, that we might be transfigured and leave here with the freedom to live lives not marked by fear or restraint, not even by a good dose of Anglican moderation, but boldly, with a sense that everything we do is deeply rooted in God. This is the freedom that we seek, it cannot be explained, but we know it when we see it. And I pray that when we do, we will understand ‘the point of the Transfiguration,’ indeed ‘the point of being a Christian.’ Amen.