

## Luke 9:28-43

I remember very well the first public examination that I sat at school. It was my 'O' level French aural comprehension exam. The pupils listened to a recording of a story in French and then were asked to turn over a question paper that asked questions in English about the recorded material. So we all nervously listened to the recording and then set about answering the questions. I was pleased because I knew the answers or thought I did. Because I was awoken from my wee bubble of concentration by a sharp smack over the head. My French teacher who was also invigilating had noticed a silly error in my answer as he was walking past and had decided that a sharp wake up was needed. It was naughty of him and no doubt wouldn't happen these days but it did the job in jolting me from my confidence

bubble. When reading the Gospel story today I always feel that Peter received the verbal equivalent of a clip around the ears. He misread the situation so badly and there is no doubt that his future relationship with Jesus took some time to right itself after this.

Some of have read the Transfiguration story as an account that has found itself in the wrong part of the Gospel record. Here is a story that fits perfectly with the resurrection stories and for some reason it has been shunted forwards for effect. We have Jesus shining as if he had been resurrected and we have sleepy disciples just as they would be in Gethsemane when Jesus prepared for his glory. I think the view is somewhat forced however. It is true that the story of the Transfiguration was written after the resurrection appearances of Jesus and so like all Gospel writing was profoundly influenced by the resurrection. In fact the

account of the distressed man and his child that follows directly on is offered as a challenge to the church, through the failure of the disciples to act appropriately, to listen to Jesus. People who take the reality of the resurrection of Jesus seriously listen to Jesus.

The meeting with Moses and Elijah on the mountaintop may appear to be a random one. There may have been a list of appropriate Old Testament greats who would have done just as well. But no - Moses and Elijah were chosen because they represented the Law and Prophetic tradition in Israel equally. Both characters were defined by their journeys to the land or through the land in God's service. They were both involved in exodus journeys, Moses explicitly so and Elijah in the sense he was always on the way, ultimately to glory. So Jesus met with the two great travellers and identified his mission closely with theirs. Peter seems to have

picked up something of this when he offered to make three tabernacle dwellings for them. These were temporary abodes particularly suited to the sojourner. Once that idea was rejected Jesus and his followers journeyed back down the mountain with God's instruction ringing in their ears, 'listen to him'. This, they immediately failed to do, as they were unable to cope with the afflicted child. They had failed to understand that seeing Jesus differently must affect the way they see others too. They, themselves, must allow the transformed Jesus to transform them in turn.

Heidi Neumark, in her memoir *Breathing Space: A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx*, detailed the transformation of the church she served for almost twenty years. The church was struggling, barely surviving, when she arrived. Standing amid poverty and the myriad problems that can accompany such a demon

- crime, drug abuse, lack of education and opportunity, lack of hope - the church mostly kept its doors shut tight to the world around it. The work of Jesus rebuking the unclean spirit was example enough for Heidi Neumark. “When Peter and the others came down the mountain,” she wrote, “they found a father and a child gasping for life. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. And they found transfiguration. And so it is. When the disciples of this Bronx church unlocked the doors of their private shelter and stepped out into the neighbourhood, they did meet the distress of the community convulsed and mauled by poverty. But they also discovered transfiguration as a congregation in connection with others.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Neumark, Heidi 2003 *Breathing Space: A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx* Boston: Beacon Press p269

It's very important that the story of the meeting with the child and his father is read along with the mountaintop experience.

The point of the Transfiguration is not that we experience a boost to our private spirituality. 'Wouldn't it be great if it were like this all the time', is not the mantra of the Transfiguration. Instead it is: 'do we have the vision to see how the Transfiguration takes us into the public square to see unimagined possibilities?' It's therefore all about transformed service.

The great violinist, Nicolo Paganini, willed his marvellous violin to Genoa -- the city of his birth -- but only on condition that the instrument would never be played. It was an unfortunate condition, for it is a peculiarity of wood that as long as it is used and handled, it shows little wear. As soon as it is discarded, it begins to decay. The exquisite, mellow-toned violin

has become worm-eaten in its beautiful case, valueless except as a relic. The decaying instrument is a reminder that a life withdrawn from all service to others loses its meaning.<sup>2</sup> Service is not an optional activity.

Furthermore how we serve matters. Richard Foster in his important book *Celebration of Discipline* elaborates on the significant differences between serving ones own ego and serving others.

“Self-righteous service comes through human effort. True service comes from a relationship with the divine Other deep inside.

Self-righteous service is impressed with the "big deal." True service finds it almost impossible to distinguish the small from the large service.

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<sup>2</sup> Bits & Pieces, June 25, 1992.

Self-righteous service requires external rewards. True service rests contented in hiddenness.

Self-righteous service is highly concerned about results. True service is free of the need to calculate results.

Self-righteous service picks and chooses whom to serve. True service is indiscriminate in its ministry.

Self-righteous service is affected by moods and whims. True service ministers simply and faithfully because there is a need.

Self-righteous service is temporary. True service is a life-style.

Self-righteous service is without sensitivity. It insists on meeting the need even when to do so would be destructive. True service can withhold the service as freely as perform it.



Self-righteous service fractures community. True service, on the other hand, builds community.”<sup>3</sup>

It was the building of the community of the risen Christ to serve the world that God’s Spirit was about as Jesus and his disciples came down the mountain. To this day, God remains committed in Christ to the same enterprise. May we all be willing to follow. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Foster, Richard 2008 Celebration of Discipline, "The Discipline of Service" London: Hodder and Stoughton