

AMAZING, ABSOLUTELY AMAZING

Last Sunday after Epiphany, Sunday, Feb 26, 2017

St. Paul's Cathedral, Kamloops BC

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I don't know about you, but Epiphany season for me has been wonderful this year. I am still working through a string of first experiences here at St. Paul's and in Kamloops. I more than survived our Annual Meeting, an event which brings anxiety for most clergy. Ours was just *amazing*. Otherwise, and apart from one windy morning, I really enjoyed shovelling snow; it's a great workout and interior snow is much lighter than coastal slop. For me, there is still in most days enough new experience to delight and intrigue me. For extroverts like myself, variety is the spice of life.

So I wonder, as Matthew sat down to write his Gospel if he felt similarly. Writing his Gospel, a literary undertaking done without computers, Wikipedia, or online fora, how did he decide to order things. Yes, the story of Jesus' life and ministry does follow a chronological pattern. Mark, Luke and John however arrange some things differently, for their own reasons. For instance, many scholars think today's description of the Transfiguration was originally a post-resurrection story, like Jesus appearing in a locked room or eating fish by the seashore. The presence of Elijah and Moses would appeal to Mathew's Jewish readers who might expect these faith heroes to appear in visions of the future and not as part of an unfolding narrative.

Like Thomas Cahill, whose wonderful series of "hinge" books (How the Irish Saved Civilization, The Gift of the Jews, The Desire of the Everlasting Hills) described transition times in the history of people and cultures, Matthew's placement of the story at this point in his Gospel serves as a literary pivot. Chapter sixteen has Jesus predict his death; the remaining verses of chapter seventeen deal first with the healing of an epileptic

boy, then comes another prediction of Jesus' death and then a conversation around the Temple Tax (which is like saying the words "carbon tax" aloud as I did in Calgary last weekend – what a reaction).

If his Gospel were music, it would be called an interlude; if included within a long opera it would be an ideal time to visit the washroom, or plug the parking meter. So *why* is it there? What does it add to the whole amazing Christ-story? Some say it's an inspiring and energy producing moment amidst much daily grind. "Let's go up the mountain" some say and rid ourselves of the every-day valley drudge. That's how many folks view religion, as an escape from the daily grind.

Others say that given the repetition of God's declaration at Jesus' baptism, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him" it reminds us readers, of God's pleasure and Jesus' authority.

If we have played with the question of *why* the story is placed here, let's spend some time on *what* it tells about Jesus and our vocation. It certainly harks back to the Lord's Prayer (Mt 6:11) where God's Kin-dom comes *on earth as in heaven*, or more to today's point Christ is glimpsed *as heaven on earth*. Theologians call this "realized eschatology." Essentially God's good presence and grace is not reserved for heaven's future but is active, in some measure right here, right now. That's encouraging; that's exciting.

Peter, James and John are given a glimpse, even for a very short time, of Jesus, their master and friend, in a most extra-ordinary though still physical environment. Their experience gets me thinking about the relationship between divine and material things, a distinction I used to view as quite separate, though less so now. Attending the funeral of a great-aunt some years ago, the preacher shared some words from Pierre Teilhard de Chardin:

“We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience.”

Chardin’s observation is so, so close to the helpful blending of heaven and earth on display in today’s Gospel. He describes well the human condition: We are flesh and blood; We are capable of good and great things; We are spiritually sensitive and imbued with Divine Presence in some amazing mixture of Spirit, flesh and blood. We think, we feel, we act, we regret, we create, we imagine, we are historical and we are contemporary and future oriented; We savour the present moment; We are amazing, finding ourselves in the image and likeness of God.

The church I attended in Calgary last week has a great video invitation on its website. It ends with these words: “You are amazing.” The video text does not say “come get your life fixed by us.” They say “*welcome . . .* regardless of anything and everything you think, do, feel or act.” Staff are looking at creating something similar for our own communications here at St. Paul’s. We offer such an invitation prior to sharing Eucharist together. We should now do it online.

Jesus is transfigured yes, and there is something unique to his effervescence. I am not saying that we are God, or Gods. I am saying however that being created in God’s image, and living into God’s likeness, we are amazing creatures capable of great things. The transfiguration extends well the imagination of Peter, James and John. But it’s not just a cute story about something happening to some people in a land far away and long ago. It’s about us and our constant conversion into new being in Christ. If Peter, James and John were encouraged, then so shall we be also.

Such inspiration comes by degrees and over time . . . so maybe that explains Jesus' injunction to keep this whole transfiguration experience quiet, at least for now. But here's the Good News; the embargo is now lifted. Jesus' resurrection changed all that. Mystery solved, Gospel shared. The truth is that we are all in some comparable way transfigured, transformed, redeemed. As the old hymn goes "ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven" (more on "Forgiven this Thursday – as Donal Trump would say "it's gonna be great, really great"). Sorry, couldn't resist . . .

Many people attend church hoping that one day they will get things right. Others, and I hope this is your experience, discover over time that God has already done so much good in and through you. So we celebrate together. Now that's an energized church, one which attracts people of all walks and conditions of life, because the faith experience we seek and exhibit is attractive.

Wow. That's Good News. Thanks be to God!