



Sermon by Rev Ross Pearce Highfield Road Uniting Church February 7, 2016

Luke 9: 28-36

An important part of spirituality, especially Celtic spirituality, is the notion of 'thin places'. Places where the barrier between the earthly and the divine are very thin and you can feel yourself in the presence of God. While some of this may come from older religions, and it's easy to get diverted onto talk of ley lines and energy distribution, the basic concept rings true for many of us. There are places where it just seems easier to believe in God, easier to pray, easier to feel the Spirit. For some that might be a lush place in the wild; a waterfall in a glade or a shady tree beside a creek. For some it might be a grand church or cathedral, or wilderness, or, as I was saying to the children, a mountain. For much of the history of the people of Israel, mountains were special, they were the 'thin places'. Abraham and Isaac on Moriah, Sinai and the law, Carmel and Elijah, Zion and Jerusalem and on to the future feasts on the mountain of the Lord in Isaiah. Even when the people turned from their faith, they still offered prayers and sacrifices to other gods on 'the high places'. Whether it's the feeling of being closer to heaven or the idea of being on top of the world, mountains are important in the Hebrew Scriptures, and when Luke says that Jesus took Peter and John and James and went up a mountain, the reader will sense that this is a special place and something important is going to happen.

And something important does happen, but just like the symbolism of the mountain – thin place, close to God – the story of what happened is loaded with symbolism and references to Hebrew Scripture and history. If someone told you they had a dream that resembled this story, how would you interpret all the symbols here?

Dazzling white clothes:

Light and dazzling brilliance have always been associated with God, and in our culture are symbols of good. Light shines the way and uncovers evil, white is the symbol of good and celebration. If you had this symbolism in a dream it would be a sign of something good, something divine. In the context of this story from Luke, here is the presence of God. Given the mention of Moses, we think of his encounter with God on Mt Sinai and how the dazzling brilliance left Moses face glowing. But it is more than a glowing face like Moses, Jesus whole person is dazzling bright – one translation says 'like a flash of lighting'. Rather than Jesus in an encounter with God, we might say that the disciples are encountering God in Jesus.

Important figures from history:

If you saw Moses and Elijah in a dream, the immediate question would be, “how did you know they were Moses and Elijah?” But, setting that aside, our immediate response might be Law and Prophets. Or it might be, the other men who encountered God on a mountain. However, there is symbolism beyond what they represent? Are they supporting Jesus or instructing him? Given the dazzling brilliance, we would presume the former.

A cloud covering the people:

I think for many of us this is a confused symbol. Cloudy for us means obscured, with all those negative associations of fog or darkness. It could mean mysterious, but for Luke and that culture, a cloud was also associated with God and heaven and the divine. The disciples are terrified as they enter the cloud because it symbolises an even closer encounter with God; like the Israelites at the foot of Mt Sinai.

All that symbolism, as I have noted, is based in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament. And it could be used to say that this is a vision of Jesus place in the unfolding of god’s dealing with Israel. Jesus is another prophet in the long line that stretches back to Moses and even further. Jesus has come to restore Israel to the teaching of Moses and the Prophets. It’s all there; mountain, light, Moses and Elijah, and the cloud. But. Then we have the voice from the cloud. “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him.” All this symbolism from the past is not to say Jesus is restoring the faith of old, it’s to lead you to the new way offered by God that is actually supported by the words and ways of old. Listen to Jesus.

While it’s good to read these highpoint stories, it’s a shame that we read them out of the context that the authors wanted them to be read within. Luke wants “Listen to him” to be heard directly after Jesus tells the disciples that he has to be rejected, killed and then raised. It’s not just the teaching that the disciples are to listen to, it’s the nature of the mission that Jesus is on.

This is a hard story to read if you want the Gospels to be a biography, an account of Jesus words and actions. There are questions that can’t be answered in that mode. But it is a great story if you respond to symbolism and understand thin places, visions and spiritual insights. Before the disciples take on the hard journey to Jerusalem and the betrayal, arrest and crucifixion, they receive a vision of Jesus as the one sent by God, indeed the one in whom God dwells, and that all the difficulties ahead are not a denial of scripture and their beliefs, but the way ahead for faith.

There is so much more to our faith and traditions than simply head knowledge and theology; prayer opens us up to God and symbolism, visions and ‘thin places’ are all a part of that. To varying degrees in different people. We are not all mystics who can see visions in flames, but we are people who are open to symbolism and spirituality. Colour, weather,

space, flames and metaphors can all work to point us towards truths and build our understanding of Jesus and our faith. And, just as the vision ended – this was not the place to build monuments or chapels – and the disciples went back down the mountain and followed Jesus to Jerusalem, those symbols and visions and understandings that we receive are not a place to stay and hold on to. They are strength and spiritual feeding to carry on our journeys following Jesus in the difficult and demanding world of mission and ministry.