

SUNDAY OF THE TRANSFIGURATION
23 FEBRUARY 2020
CHURCH OF THE GOOD SHEPHERD, NASHUA, NH

He was transformed in front of them... (Mt 17.2).

These words try to describe what is hard to describe. Peter, James and John have an intense, life-changing experience. It was a turning point in their lives. A vision that gives them profound insight into who Jesus is. And they were terrified. . . . *they knelt with their faces on the ground, and were frightened out of their wits. And Jesus came and touched them and said, 'Get up; don't be afraid'.* Why is Jesus saying to you today: *Get up; don't be afraid?* Is that a word you need to take-in right now? *Get up; don't be afraid.* Why is Jesus saying to this branch of the Jesus movement: ***Get up; don't be afraid?*** Is there someone that God needs you to bring these words to: ***Get up; don't be afraid?*** We are transformed. We are changed. Religious practice transforms our experience of life. Through religious practice we are changed and so is the world. There's no more important teaching for us to grasp.

Peter was troubled. He got anxious. He became afraid. He tried to hold-on to the vision, to understand what just happened. *Master, it's a good thing we're here. If you want, I'll set up three tents here, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.* Then there was the voice: *'This is my son, the one I love—I fully approve of him.'* Then it was over, and Jesus chases them off the mountain. Because, you see, Jesus' ministry (and ours) lies in our service, in our ministry, in our action in the world, with others. God wants them/us off the mountain to serve those who need hope, care and love. A life of service. Justice-doing. That's our calling card. What did they hear? *This is my son, the one I love—I fully approve of him.*

Now, my guess is that's not the same thing we hear. We don't hear: 'You're to one I love—I fully approve of you.' Instead, we hear: 'You're not very good at that.' 'You really messed up, again' 'Won't you ever get it right.' 'I'm so dissatisfied with you.' No. 'You're the one I love' is the word we hear today. Isn't that what God wants us to hear? God is pleased with us. God is happy with us. God approves of us. God accepts us. God loves us. God delights in us. We are God's beloved. Can we grasp this ancient wisdom, a wisdom that lies at the heart of any ministry for the good of the world. God sparks in us a vocation for the well-being of others, not only for ourselves but for everyone, but it begins with this awareness that we are God's beloved. If God loves me unconditionally then God loves you and you and you and you as far as the eye can see. Everyone. *Get up; don't be afraid.* To grasp this reality—God's love—is what it means to be transformed.

So, early and medieval teachers would turn to that wonderfully erotic Hebrew love poem, the *Song of Songs* to talk about this good news.¹ It's not an obvious place to look. The *Song* suggests the human and divine in relationship are like lovers. Is that how you describe your relationship to God? Like you're lovers. *Hark! My beloved! Here he comes, bounding over the mountains, leaping over the hills. My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag. There he stands outside our wall, peering in at the windows, gazing through the lattice. My beloved spoke, saying to me: 'Rise up, my daring; my fair one, come away' (Song 2.8-10).* It's an amazing sketch of human-divine relationship. Do you experience God as your lover? Or is that just a stretch too far? For me, it's all about the intimacy of God.

The rabbis interpreted the poem symbolically. The symbolic interpretation of scripture is, after all, an old way to read sacred texts. It's not a rouse foisted on the modern Christian world by Anglican liberals. How else might we read Scripture than as an attempt to articulate a reality that's clearly beyond us? How

¹ Cf. Richard A. Norris, *The Song of Songs: Interpreted by Early Christian and Medieval Commentators* (Grand Rapids, MI, 2003.)

can we talk about the ineffable, the mysterious, the Unknowable except with figures and enigmas? The *Song* celebrates human-divine love. It's graceful. It's sensuous. It's erotic. Two lovers profess love for each other. Our relationship with God is like lovers.

The Romanian writer Herta Mueller once said²:

DO YOU HAVE A HANDKERCHIEF was the question my mother asked me every morning, standing by the gate of our house, before I went out onto the street. I didn't have a handkerchief. And because I didn't, I would go back inside and get one. I never had a handkerchief because I would always wait for her question. The handkerchief was proof that my mother was looking after me in the morning. For the rest of the day I was on my own. The question DO YOU HAVE A HANDKERCHIEF was an indirect display of affection. Anything more direct would have been embarrassing and not something the farmers practiced. Love disguised itself as a question. That was the only way it could be spoken: matter-of-factly, in the tone of a command, or the deft maneuvers used for work. The brusqueness of the voice even emphasized the tenderness. Every morning I went to the gate once without a handkerchief and a second time with a handkerchief. Only then would I go out onto the street, as if having the handkerchief meant having my mother there, too.

She asked, 'Can it be that the question about the handkerchief was never about the handkerchief at all, but rather about the acute solitude of a human being?' What an apt description of us. The acute solitude of human beings. Does the Transfiguration of Jesus suggest a remedy for the acute solitude of human beings? Can this encounter be proof that God is looking after us? ... an indirect display of affection ... love disguised as a question ... the tenderness ... having <God> there? Pema Chodron said: 'Theism is a deep-seated conviction that there is some hand to hold.' The Psalmist sings: 'If they stumble, they shall not fall headlong, for God holds them by the hand' (Ps 37.25). Some hand to hold. The acute solitude of human beings. The intimacy of relationship. The intimacy of God with human beings.

Prayer is not just a good feeling in the heart but about growth, change and transformation. Can we allow ourselves to be changed by our prayer, to leave self behind, to see God in all things, to trust and love another, to cross boundaries and transcend limitations? Because it's all about love. Think how different our life would be if we saw ourselves as lovers! Dorothy Day once said: 'We cannot love God unless we love each other. We know God in the breaking of bread, and we are not alone anymore. Heaven is a banquet, and life is too—even with a crust—as long as there is companionship. We have all known loneliness. We have learned that the only solution is love. And love comes with community.'

He was transformed in front of them...

The Very Reverend Kenneth W. Poppe

² Herta Mueller, 'Every word knows something of a vicious circle,' *Nobel Lecture*, December 7, 2009.