

Reflection on Mark 8:31–34; 9:2–10
Rev. Christine Gilbert for the St. Andrew's by the Sea Uniting Church

The brilliance and shine of the Transfiguration of Jesus we celebrate today can feel like a marked contrast to the mood many of us are presently experiencing in Australia. This week, I used the word doldrum to describe where we seem to be on our COVID journey. Sean, an experienced sailor, informed me that doldrum comes from a sailing term which sent me to the internet to find out more about it.

The doldrums refer to the belt around the earth extending approximately five degrees north and south of the equator. Here, the trade winds from the northern hemisphere and the southern hemisphere collide. Because the colliding air circulates in an upward direction, there is often little surface wind in the doldrums belt meaning sailing ships get stuck on the windless sea. They don't go anywhere.

The time we are in can feel a bit like that, I think. The energy needed to survive and adapt in the early days of the pandemic have passed. The solitude and peace of lockdown are a distant memory. Overseas travel has been put on the back burner and even interstate travel comes with a certain amount of nervousness and risk. Many COVID safe practices have become like second nature as we await a vaccine rollout that will take months to implement. In other words, it can feel like we're going nowhere, anchored by an inspiration-less belt of monotony and lacklustre routine.

Spirituality is often billed as something that helps us make progress. It is thought to be largely about self-improvement, becoming better people who, in turn, can make the world better. So, what might spirituality bring to a seemingly dispirited season such as this? a time when we seem to be going nowhere? In listening to the story of Jesus' transfiguration with the ear of the heart, insight and wisdom may be revealed.

The scene in Mark's Gospel is set in the context of some difficult truths. Jesus has just spoken openly to the disciples about the suffering he is about to endure. He will be rejected by the religious powers-that-be and killed and will rise again on the third day.

A tussle ensues. Peter, speaking for many of us I suspect, wishes it might not be so. Shocked by not only the horror of what will happen to his friend Jesus, he is upset, too, by the implications for himself. *Surely this is not the way of it!* Peter pulls Jesus aside and questions him privately. But, turning to the disciples, Jesus reprimands Peter in front of everyone, thus driving the message home for us all:

There is a difference between the loves and pursuits of “the world” and the pursuits and loves of God. You must put behind you the ways of this world if you wish to be my disciple.

Then, lest there be any doubt, Jesus turns to the crowd and speaks those well-known yet challenging words: *If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.* But before Jesus sets his face on Jerusalem where all these things will come to pass, he ascends with Peter, James and John to the summit of a mountain where he is transfigured before them.

Now, it may be tempting to lessen the mysticism in this scene by giving into our curiosity about the dazzling clothes, the presence of Moses and Elijah, the voice from the cloud that overshadows Peter, James and John. In other words: Did Jesus’ clothing *really* turn white? and if so, how? Were Moses and Elijah *really* there? and if so, what does it mean? Did a voice *really* speak from the heavens? and if so, what did it sound like? But these kinds of questions distract from the heart of the matter.

So, what exactly is the heart of the matter? Pope Francis says it simply and succinctly like this, “In the Transfiguration, Jesus shows us the glory of the Resurrection: a glimpse of heaven on earth.” Jesus’ transfiguration is a thin place, a moment of transcendence, an epiphany revealing that which is always true even when we might lose the sense of it much of the time. The ground on which we walk is holy, charged with the grandeur of God. For Christ is at home here and through his Spirit, God is continually at work, renewing creation, birthing love and goodness.

Before this mystery, Peter is startled and dumbfounded as we all might be. He doesn’t know what to make of it. So Peter being Peter—and Peter representing many of us I suspect—he *feels he must do and say something!*

The fright and discomfort of our uselessness and lack of control can be a powerful driver of frenetic activity and prattle. Peter’s terror in the face of transcendence or our own restlessness in these months of doldrum might tempt us to take matters into our own hands. When we’re unsure what can be done or when nothing seems to be happening, it can be reassuring to be doing something at least.

Peter’s babbling is quieted when a cloud overshadows them and a voice is heard affirming Jesus as the beloved son of God to whom we are to listen. In this brief declaration within the transfiguration scene is found wisdom and direction for Christian spirituality and its practice.

For, you see, spirituality is not first and foremost *about us*. It is about that which is greater than and beyond us—the Holy One, God, Christ, Spirit or the countless other names and images we might give the sacred in our experience. As Parker Palmer puts it, “Spirituality is the eternal human yearning to be connected with something larger than our own egos.”

So, alternative to Peter’s knee-jerk reaction is the invitation to be still and to behold, to seek out and gaze at the glory within and around us. Instead of giving into the driving fear of our own powerlessness and irrelevance at times (that is, the loss of ego), we are invited to deny ourselves willingly and follow in the way of Jesus—a counter intuitive yet life-giving, deeply fulfilling venture of self-giving love. For the more we decrease, the more Christ increases.

The late Eugene Peterson, Minister and author of *The Message*, wrote a book with the title *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*. I find the title compelling in and of itself. It speaks of resilience and perseverance, fidelity to a particular way and to the One who goes before us.

Christian discipleship is a process of paying more and more attention to God’s righteousness and less and less attention to our own; finding the meaning of our lives not by probing our moods and motives and morals but by believing in God’s will and purposes; making a map of the faithfulness of God, not charting the rise and fall of our enthusiasms. It is out of such a reality that we acquire perseverance.

...[E]very day, I set aside what I can do best and attempt what I do very clumsily—opening myself to the frustrations and failures of loving, daring to believe that falling in love is better than succeeding in pride.

May we in this season of doldrum, scan the horizon for evidence that God’s love remains at work. May we look back and see God’s constancy and faithfulness in our past and may this instil in us gratitude and trust for the future. May we let go and give way to the love within and beyond us. And let’s see what happens!