

Jesus, the law & the prophets

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 11 February 2024

A Reflection by Allison Gentle

Transfiguration B

Contemporary Readings *Drifting* by Mary Oliver; *A Meditation on Transformative Spirituality* by Richard Rohr; Mark 9: 2-9

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

We are meeting today on Transfiguration Sunday, the day that marks the end of the season of Epiphany and looks towards the season of Lent, that will start on Wednesday. So I'd like to pick up some of the themes we have shared during Epiphany and especially those that point us towards the journey of Lent, the themes of pilgrimage, God who speaks, tensions between tradition and encounters with the living God, and spiritual transformation.

The story of the Transfiguration is a biblical treasure. In Mark's gospel, the version we just heard, it is a very short story, but when it is unpacked, it draws together some key threads of the gospel, and indeed of the place of Christ's earthly life in the broad sweep of Biblical history. These start with the setting. Jesus took three of his disciples up a mountain, where they saw him talking with Elijah and Moses. The image of these three figures together in one place sparks many mythical resonances from the saga of our faith.

Moses spent 40 days on Mount Sinai receiving from God the ten commandments, and other detailed instructions for the life of the community Moses led, and during that time, the mountain was covered in cloud. It was Moses who brought the commandment, "*Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength,*" which became part of the most important Jewish prayer, the *shema*. Moses was also given the commandment, "*Love your neighbour as yourself.*" These are just two of a long list of 613 laws recorded across three books of the Hebrew Scriptures. The commandments we are most familiar with are only the first ten of these, and the ones Jesus thought were the greatest were the other two I just quoted.

Elijah lived about 500 years after Moses but he took the *shema* to heart and urging people to turn their whole hearts to one God was the main message of his prophetic work. The Jewish kingdom had split into two parts, the north, Israel, and the south, Judah. In the northern part, worship of idols and multiple gods was common, including in the royal household, King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, a priestess of Baal, the god of fertility and rain.

After years of prophesying to the people and their king, Elijah had attracted nothing but hostility and spent years hiding in fear for his life. All the other prophets of God had been killed or were in hiding. But he persisted, and after three years of drought, which he had predicted, Elijah proposed to Ahab that there be an event to challenge the gods each worshipped to set fire to a sacrifice and settle the question.

The prophets of Baal made a pile of wood and put pieces of a sacrificial bull on it, and Elijah, the only surviving prophet of God who was not in hiding, did likewise with another bull. Then Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal to call on the name of Baal to set fire to their sacrifice. He proposed that whichever god answered the call, they would be God. The prophets of Baal agreed. They called on Baal from morning to noon, but there was no fire. Elijah taunted them to shout louder to wake up their god who was perhaps sleeping or too busy to answer them. They shouted and danced and cut themselves till evening.

Then Elijah repaired his altar, using wood and twelve stones to represent the tribes of Israel descended from Jacob. Then he put the pieces of meat on it, and dug a trench around it. He called on the prophets of Baal to pour water on the offering and the wood. They used four large jars of water three times until the altar was drenched and water ran down and filled the trench. Elijah prayed aloud: *“Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel... Answer me Lord, so these people will know that you Lord, are God and that you are turning their hearts back again.”*

And the altar caught fire, burning up the sacrifice, wood, stones and soil, evaporating the water in the trench. The people fell on the ground crying The Lord is God. But Elijah had the prophets of Baal executed. He was a man of his time, and the times were violent. Elijah wasn't following the commandment to love his neighbour, and he hadn't heard Jesus's teaching about how broadly to define neighbours. He told Ahab to go and eat and wait for the rain.

Elijah climbed to the top of Mount Carmel and prayed. He sent his servant seven times to look towards the sea for signs of coming rain, but the servant said there was nothing. The seventh time he reported a cloud as small as a hand above the sea. That was enough for Elijah to send his servant to announce to Ahab that rain was coming, and heavy rain did come.

But when Queen Jezebel heard that Elijah had killed the prophets of Baal, she vowed to do the same to him. He beat a hasty retreat to Judah in the south, sat under a bush and prayed, *“I've had enough Lord, take my life,”* before falling asleep. An angel gave him food and drink to prepare him for a long journey. He traveled forty days and forty nights to the same mountain where Moses had received the law, where he spent the night in a cave. God asked him, *“What are you doing here, Elijah?”*

He said, *“I have been very zealous for the Lord God almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars and put your prophets to death. I am the only one left and now they are trying to kill me too.”* God said, go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by. A great wind came, but God was not in the wind. Then there was an earthquake, but God was not in the earthquake. After that came a fire, but God was not in the fire.

After the fire there was a still small voice. God asked again, *“What are you doing here Elijah?”* and Elijah gave the same answer. God told him that there were seven thousand people in Israel who still worshipped one God. Elijah was given commissions to anoint a new king of Israel, and Elisha as his own successor. Having done this, Elijah was taken up into heaven in a chariot of fire without dying. It was believed that Elijah would come again, and this is why people wondered if John the Baptist and Jesus himself were Elijah.

So these were the two people talking with Jesus on the day of his transfiguration, Moses, giver of the law, and Elijah, zealous prophet, both having known the God who speaks, both committed to the commandments that God is one, and that God is to be loved by God's people with all their hearts, souls and strength.

All three had prophetic gifts, lived the lives of pilgrims, lives shaped by the symbols of mountains, cloud and fire, and all three had experienced 40-day intense encounters with God. The image of Jesus in dialogue with Moses and Elijah summons all the stories through Mark's gospel and the others, of Jesus's relationship to the law and the prophets.

Jesus often advised people to live by the commandments, and when asked about the greatest commandment, he quoted that God is one, to be loved with all our heart, soul and strength, and that we are to love our neighbours as ourselves. He said that on these two commandments hung all the others, and the teachings of the prophets. It has been observed that of the ten commandments, the first four are about love of God and the second six are about love of neighbour. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus said he came to fulfil the law, not to abolish it. In John's gospel, he gave a new commandment, for people to love one another as he had loved them.

But that is not to say that Jesus agreed with the Jewish religious leaders who believed they were fulfilling the law and the prophets. Quite the contrary! In Mark he argued with them about the importance of strict observance of the Sabbath and called them hypocrites, saying *"You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men."* He quoted Isaiah to them: *"These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men."*

In Matthew's account he went further, calling the Jewish leaders a brood of vipers: *"You have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness. You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel."*

Jesus believed in the law and the prophets, but not what the religious leaders of his day had made of them. In much the same way, progressive Christianity pares back the essential teachings of the Bible and the tradition, while rejecting an unhealthy focus on sin and evil and on what has been called the Victorian overlay of an emphasis on repressive sexual morality that is not reflective of the overall message of the Christian teachings. Jayne Ozanne, a gay Christian writer and activist, visited Australia last year and an audience member asked her to respond to something Paul said about homosexuality. Ozanne said she wasn't interested in addressing particular isolated verses. She quoted the times Jesus said feed my sheep, feed my lambs, as more representative of the whole gospel message and asked how that squared with church practices that harm people.

On the day of the transfiguration, Peter wanted to make three tabernacles, to honour Jesus, Moses and Elijah. But he was answered by the descending cloud, and God's voice naming Jesus as the one to carry God's message forward: *"This is my son, the beloved, listen to him!"* And Jesus was the last one standing, the one who taught us to worship from our hearts, our first priority to love our one God whole-heartedly, and to love our neighbours. And to know ourselves as loved by God.

One reading we heard during Epiphany gave us the image from the time of the prophet Eli, the lamp of God that had not gone out. We are at another point in history when the lamp of God is burning low, but it has not gone out. When Jo preached on this passage, she saw it as a call to reconnect with the living God, not just the inheritance of the past. To listen to the God who speaks and discern what God is saying to us today.

Richard Rohr, in the reading we heard today, also emphasises the importance of direct contact with the divine. He said, “*Religions are valuable carriers of the tradition within a community, but they must not be allowed to choke out the breath of the spirit, which breathes where it will.*”

So how do we enter into this direct contact with the divine? Prayer is one way. Martin Buber said our relationship with God is transformative if we enter into it from the position of I-thou, meaning I-you singular. When we talk about God in the third person, we are in what Buber called our two-fold nature. When we talk directly to God, we can only speak with our whole being. The self we are before God in prayer, when we open our hearts and speak of our deepest hopes and fears, is our most authentic self, and we are giving ourselves over to the source of all healing and transformation.

For those who find the stillness and silence of sitting in prayer difficult, after a decent interval of persistence, there are other ways. As Abbot John Chapman advised: *Pray as you can, not as you can't*. Reverend Penny, our minister's wife and collaborator, loves movement prayer, and finds in dance a direct experience of God, enhanced because it is embodied. Other people like ritual, lighting a candle, using a finger labyrinth, following time worn steps that lead them into the presence of God, as if their soul has formed an ingrained habit. Some people like to read the Bible as a prelude to prayer, finding that they draw close to God as they read the word. Pray as you can, not as you can't.

But prayer is not the only way to have that direct experience of God. Mary Oliver's walk in the rain is another way, finding holiness visible in nature by letting thoughts drift, rather than sending them on a mission to seek answers.

Sometimes we feel a strong inclination to do something, and when we do it, we feel a powerful confirmation that we were answering a call, and that we heard the call because we were open to the presence of God, a direct experience of God that might have seemingly come out of nowhere. We might not have been in prayer, we might not have been reading the Bible or turning our minds to the mystery of God, but there God was, as God always is, and somehow the veil moved aside, a thin place emerged, and God spoke to us. God speaks, we just need to learn how to listen.

Sometimes there are obstacles to entering into the presence of God, and if we seek to uncover them, we can name them and let them go. Sometimes it is an idea we have of God that obstructs rather than enables the encounter. If we are praying to someone who God isn't, we may experience God as absent. If we have an idea of what prayer should be, or who we should be in order to qualify for the privilege of God's presence, these ideas, these “shoulds”, can get in the way.

But any whole-hearted address to God will be answered, one way or another, sooner or later. So we are going to invite you now, to sit for a few moments in silence and if you need more time, to continue when the chant starts, and ask God to reveal to you if there is something you each need to let go of in order to be open to the experience of the divine presence.

As we sing the chant *In God Alone* you're invited to come forward and select a stone to add to the mound as a symbol of the things you would like to leave behind in your process of spiritual transformation.