

## Second Sunday of Lent

*Jesus took with him Peter and John and James and went up the mountain to pray. As he prayed, the aspect of his face was changed and his clothing became brilliant as lightning.*

Luke 9, 28-36



As we grow older and wiser, we come to realise that where we stand influences what we see, and what we see influences what we say and do. One of the great paradoxes that emerged from the interpersonal engagements Jesus had in the course of his ministry was that the religious leaders who had two good eyes were blind to what they saw him doing, while those who were physically blind were able to see very clearly. Mystics in the Christian tradition, and, to my knowledge, in the Jewish and Islamic traditions, have spoken and written about seeing with “the third eye” – a way of seeing from the depths of one’s being or with what some of them refer to as “seeing with the soul”. Such seeing grows out of investing time in quiet and deep reflection. Whether or not we are practiced in deep reflection, we do know one thing to which modern psychology has drawn our attention: what and how we see has a significant impact on how we behave.

Just on thirty years ago, the American adult educator and businessman, Steve Covey published a book entitled *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. Essentially, the book is an exploration of how we impact on other people. In giving us insights about ourselves, Covey opens up for us possible changes that might improve the ways in which we relate to, and communicate with, others. One of his stories offers a powerful insight into how and what we see can influence our thinking and acting. It’s a story of an experience he had one Sunday morning on the New York subway:

People in the section I was in were sitting quietly reading their newspapers or just dozing. At one stop, a man and his children got into our car and in next to no time the peace was shattered, and replaced by something resembling mayhem. The kids were yelling at one another as they ran around the carriage. Then they started throwing things and grabbing at people’s newspapers. While all this was happening, their father sat quietly next to me and did nothing to quell the riot. It was as though he didn’t register what was going on. I couldn’t believe that he was prepared to let his kinds run wild and not even try to intervene. I could see the annoyance on the faces of all the people around me. Finally, with all the restraint I could muster I turned to the man and said: “Sir, your children are really disturbing a lot of people. I wonder if you could control them just a little bit.” The man lifted his head as though he was coming into awareness for the first time since he and the children had got on. Then he turned to me and said: “Oh, you’re right. I guess I should do something about it. We just came from the hospital where their mother died about an hour ago. I don’t know what to think and I guess they don’t know how to handle it either.”

Covey shared what happened inside him: “Can you imagine what I felt at that moment? Suddenly I *saw* things differently. Because I saw differently, I *felt* differently. I *behaved* differently. My irritation vanished. I didn’t have to worry about controlling my attitude or my behaviour. My heart was filled with this man’s pain. Feelings of compassion and sympathy flowed freely. ‘Your wife just died? Oh, I’m so sorry! Can you tell me about it? What can I do to help?’”

For Covey, that was an experience of transfiguration, a moment of insight that turned him upside down and carried him through a very difficult situation. Are we any different? We, too, are given revelations of God in the ordinary events of our daily lives. Probably not every day, but if we don’t learn to *see differently* those revelations will pass us by.

Luke’s story of the Transfiguration begins with the simple statement: “Jesus took Peter, John and James up to the mountain to pray.” Mark and Matthew tell of Jesus taking Peter, John and James to pray with

him in the garden of Gethsemane just before his arrest. And the preface of this Sunday's mass provides an explanatory link between Jesus' transfiguration in the presence of these three disciples and his having them accompany him during his agony in the garden: "He revealed his glory to strengthen them for the scandal of the cross."

In commenting on these two experiences shared by Jesus with Peter, John and James, scripture scholar Bill Bausch notes that while the memory of the transfiguration was meant to bolster the three disciples when the going got tough, do the rest of us have only stories on which to rely when things are grim and when our faith is tested? The Steve Covey story demonstrates that our transfiguration experiences come to us wrapped up in the very ordinary, but there are times when we miss them because we are preoccupied with other things, or with ourselves. At other times, we catch up with them in hindsight, when we make time to reflect, and see them with our "third eye".

One of my favourite writers is Madeleine L'Engle (1918-2007), a deeply committed Christian who is probably best known for her young adults' novel *A Wrinkle in Time* (completed in 1960, it was rejected by more than thirty publishers before it was finally accepted for publication two years later). However, her writing covered a broad spectrum, from reflection on some of the very prominent characters in the Old Testament, to children's books, poetry and memoirs of her own life experiences. She also had some talent for theatre and met and later married, actor, Hugh Franklin when they both had parts in Chekhov's play, *The Cherry Orchard*. The fourth volume of her memoirs (*The Crosswicks Journals*) is about her marriage with Hugh and carries the title *Two-Part Invention: The Story of a Marriage*. L'Engle had plenty of opportunity to reflect of the way her love for Hugh grew and developed, for she nursed him through his long and painful dying of cancer of the urinary tract. This is part of what she had to say: "I do not think that death can take away the fact that Hugh and I are 'we' and 'us', a new creature born at the time of our marriage vows, which has grown along with us as our marriage has grown. Even during the times, inevitable in all marriages, when I have felt angry, or alienated, the instinctive 'we' remains...Our love has been anything but perfect and anything but static. Inevitably there have been times when one of us has outrun the other and has had to wait patiently for the other to catch up. There have been times when we have misunderstood each other, demanded too much of each other, been insensitive to the other's needs. I do not believe there is any marriage where this does not happen. The growth of love is not a straight line, but a series of hills and valleys. I suspect that in every good marriage there are times when love seems to be over. Sometimes these desert lines are simply the only way to the next oasis, which is far more lush and beautiful after the desert crossing than it could possibly have been without it." (from an article "The Instinctive 'We'" by Dan Wakefield, *New York Times*, December 18, 1988) This is not just about a particular marriage, it's about the journey we call life. What L'Engle describes is what I would call the "second transfiguration". On the mountain, the three apostles witnessed Jesus' first transfiguration, with lots of drama and dazzling splendour. His second transfiguration was his resurrection, described in subdued terms, because nobody witnessed it. But let's not miss the significance of the whispering between Moses and Elijah, mentioned in today's reading. They were pointing to the transfiguration that comes after Jesus and we have negotiated the tough struggles of life - disillusionment, disappointment, betrayal, deep pain, desertion, cynicism, bitterness, alienation, disease, loss of loved ones. God is in there somewhere, but so often we are not conscious of God's presence and support. Jesus had to go through all these things on the way to his second transfiguration into glory. Along that way, he felt abandoned by God. And so do we, when we're really down and troubled and hurting.

Today's gospel story is about much more than a "sound and light" show. From time to time, we get a glimpse of the glory to come, but along the way we have to learn to shed whatever it is that holds us back. We have to struggle through the hills, the valleys and the deserts that life puts in our way. We have to remember that we are not alone as we travel that journey. But we have the support and encouragement of one another, of the community we call parish and church, the inspiration of the people like Madeleine L'Engle and Steve Cove "Thy will be done!" Fortunately for us, however, we will never control God.