

How do we know that we have changed? How do others see the questions and dilemmas we have struggled with? Or more important how do we see within ourselves that we changed in our own lives, been courageous in ways we might not have expected?

Yesterday I took a very rare wedding here at St Anne's. Sadly we usually only have a wedding here every few years – though as you are aware we read a lot of Banns for marriage for people who return to their family village for a wedding. Benelia and Stefano looked radiant yesterday, as you would I guess expect of most brides and grooms. But they also, like most couples I marry these days have been together as a couple for nearly ten years – in fact as a congregation we welcomed their son Charlie into the community of faith only a few months ago. So one of the conversations we have had in preparation, but also with guests at the wedding yesterday was 'does it feel different to be married!' Well one hour after the ceremony is probably too early to tell – but in essence the answer is both yes and no. Will it change what they love about each other, or the little niggles that annoy each other? Probably not! But it is a public statement of their commitment to each other, and also a very formal blessing of their relationship. In front of witnesses we ask God to bless and bind their relationship, so something does happen whether we see it or not. The reality is that most change in our lives is often change that is not easily visible to see, yet it doesn't make the change any less important, or negate the person we are becoming.

Today in the life of the church we celebrate the Feast of the Transfiguration which falls every year on the 6th August. It is also the gospel reading the Sunday before Lent each year; and occasional the reading comes up on a third Sunday as well. So it is as story we recount often, because the transfiguration is such a wonderful vision of Christ who is at the centre of our faith. The transfiguration is a vision of the end – of the ultimate light of Christ shining in the world – or the divinity of God on that Holy Mountain who is made know to us in Jesus who comes to bring good news to the poor and the oppressed. The vision of the transfiguration is a sustaining image for our faith – encouraging us to remain faithful and focus on worship of our God all the days of our life. But most importantly, the vision of the transfiguration is an outward sign of who Jesus is, when sometimes changes are hard to see.

In the transfiguration we see that Jesus is reflecting God, has been in God's presence, and even in the vision we have a voice proclaiming that Jesus is God's son – in case we missed it on any other occasion.

I have been thinking a lot this week about how we reflect that we have been in the presence of God – what are the outward signs that we have prayed, or meditated, or been on retreat? How is it evident that we have encountered God? When Jesus prays his whole being shines, when Moses comes down from the mountain, or leaves the tabernacle his face shines so much that he has to wear a veil to cover up the brightness of his face.

On Thursday I was talking to a few people at Laurence's Larder who was talking about their experience of seeing the presence of God in tangible ways. One person spoke about a healing service they had been at, where the healer seemed in some way to have a glow about their person. Another person talked about having prayed, and then finding an answer in the following days in a place she had not expected. Another talked about reading the bible and finding comfort which transformed how she saw herself. Another spoke of how they experienced this in the care and welcome of others.

It is an interesting question to consider what impact our worship and prayer has upon our appearance. Maybe not so much in the way that we glow, but whether it becomes part of our physicality and the way that we hold ourselves. I wonder too if we notice the difference God makes to us, and is changing us day by day. I suspect at one level it is also linked to our expectation of God, and whether or not we have the courage to believe that God will really transform the situations we are praying for – and if we are prepared to fully enter into a relationship with God, and allow God to change us too. So often God gives us what we don't expect, and this can unsettle us.

As I was thinking about these questions, it reminded me of a prayer written by an Australian Poet and Cartoonist Michael Luenig¹ it is called Love and Fear

*God give us rain when we expect sun.
Give us music when we expect trouble.
Give us tears when we expect breakfast.
Give us dreams when we expect a storm.
Give us a stray dog when we expect congratulations.
God play with us, turn us sideways and around. Amen.*

So how does God turn us around when we need to hear what is in front of us? How does God help us to see, as well as reflect the love of God? Peter, John and James withdraw with Jesus to a quiet place to pray. The gospel tells us that the disciples are weary (tired) – this is possibly both physically and spiritually tired. Their ministry was relentless and yet Jesus calls them away to a quiet place to pray. I wonder what the disciple's expectation was – did they expect rest or replenishment? Were they looking for a spectacular sunrise, or hoping for some sleep? Maybe they even had some hope of a quiet word with Jesus or even some insight into the journey that lay ahead.

Whatever their expectations I suspect what happened was more than a surprise! For as they were praying 'Jesus appearance changed' his face and his clothing. I love the way Luke records this 'even though they are weighed down with sleep they entered the vision.

And what a vision it was. Here we see Moses and Elijah - representatives of the Hebrew tradition and linking Jesus to the Law and the Prophets. There is an element of the fulfilment of history in this vision – a climax of history. The bodies shine, as will the transfigured spiritual bodies of the resurrected (Dan 12). In the previous chapter of Luke, Jesus has just spoken of the coming of the Son of Man and the kingdom of God (Luke 9:26-27) and here we are being given a foretaste of that event – though it is also a celebration of who Jesus is.

But like most of the stories in the bible, there are many elements – and while the revelation is important – the context in which it takes place is equally important.

The story of the transfiguration is recorded in all 3 synoptic gospels – that is Matthew, Mark and Luke. But it is only Luke that places prayer at the heart of this moment of revelation. Luke starts off by saying that Jesus and His disciples go up the mountain to pray and the moment of His glory happens as Jesus prays.

Prayer is, in fact, a significant theme throughout Luke's writings. Luke is the only Gospel author to tell us of Jesus praying on other momentous occasions, too. The Holy Spirit descends on Jesus while he is praying after His baptism; Jesus chooses the twelve apostles

¹ <http://www.leunig.com.au/works/prayers>

after spending an entire night in prayer; Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah occurs in the context of Jesus' praying and Jesus prays in the garden of Gethsemane and on the cross.

Prayer is the background to all the most important moments in Jesus life in Luke's Gospel and there is an immediate and deep connection there to our lives of faith.

Prayer is at the centre of not only our relationship with God, but also the key to where we encounter change in our lives, and also is where we will find answers to what difference God is making in our lives – whether others can see it or not!

Prayer is about relationship. We pray because it is a vital way of remaining in relationship with God. We may pour out our hearts to a friend, lover, or family member not in the expectation that they are going to do something but because we need someone to share our lives and hurts and hopes with. And as we share our relationship grows stronger, and we evolve and change – so hopefully it is with our relationship with God.

As we grow in prayer perhaps prayer is also a way of attuning ourselves to God and our life under God. As we lift up to God our joys and concerns, dreams and fears, hopes and anxieties we begin to see it all in the light of our faith and in the light of our relationship with God. Through prayer we can start to change how we feel about our world as we no longer face it alone but with God and in the strength that God alone can bring to us. And as we change, and as others change – the world too will change.

Prayer too, like a familiar friendship, takes places in different contexts and places. Sometimes it is scripted and formal, sometimes it is shouting or crying and speaking fast so that we can share all our news, and sometimes it is sitting together in silence – knowing we are together and that just being in each other's presence is enough!

Dr Jane Williams,² who is one of my favourite theologians and teachers talks about the importance of taking the time, and making the space to be *attentive to God in pray*. Attentiveness she says means we notice that we don't always get answers we want, but also that sometimes we are even absent for each other. But if we are not attentive, making space each day, even when it is uncomfortable, then we will not notice how we have changed, or how God is present.

Jesus prayed at every moment of His earthly life in order to remain grounded in that reality and to be able to fulfil His mission. The command that came from the cloud to the astounded disciples was 'Listen to Him' – listen, learn, do as He asks. And so we pray; or as Leunig puts this idea in another transformative prayer:

God let us be serious.

Face to face.

Heart to heart.

Let us be fully present.

Strongly present.

Deeply serious.

*The closest we may come
to innocence.*

For it is in this attentiveness we will see our shape changed as we encounter God. Amen.

² Guildford Diocese Day on Prayer 2015 – Why pray when God already knows?