Week 2

Prepare yourself by reading Luke 9.28-43

Reflections on the Gospel reading

This event on the mountain is one of the most significant kairos moments for Jesus and his followers. Those who were not in the moment of the transfiguration could not begin to understand the confusion and terror experienced by Peter James and John. They had experienced some very amazing things as they followed Jesus around Galilee. They had seen lepers healed, demon-possessed people liberated, storms stilled, thousands fed with a few loaves and fishes but this was a quantum-leap in spiritual experiences. Dazed and confused they were in no position at the time to make sense of what they were seeing and hearing. Peter stumbled some words out about erecting three shelters out of respect for Jesus, Moses and Elijah but nothing could help them to respond to the fact that God had spoken to them and past heroes had stepped into the present. And Jesus was now not the flesh and blood prophet-teacher they had shared a few years with; he was someone else entirely, greater, more important than the greatest of the past. Somehow his future, his destiny, had been shown to them.

They wouldn’t be able to stay in that transfigured present moment for long however. No sooner were they in the moment then they were out of it and down among people whose present was centred on a very ill child. How long the mountain-top experience was in chronos terms no one can know. The kairos importance of that moment however would be revisited and pondered over in many subsequent moments.

The mountain-top moment happened eight days after another huge kairos moment that happened on the road to Caesarea-Philippi where Jesus asked the disciples who they thought he was. Peter had spoken up saying “you are the Messiah”. After sharing in his ministry for a few years in Galilee, Jesus decided that they had an adequate basis on which to respond to his question. In nearly three years with Jesus, both publically and privately, they had absorbed enough information to make an assessment about who Jesus was. After some hesitance Peter said what was on his mind. He and the other disciples hadn’t comprehended much of what Jesus was teaching in Galilee but they had come to love and trust him. It was on that basis that Peter verbalised what the others were probably thinking.

Few people understood what Jesus was teaching in Galilee and few saw his mighty works as anything more than a sideshow but some had the faith to hear and see God in their present in Jesus. The disciples understood his teaching a little more than the crowds but even they were keeping on following because of their personal love and loyalty to him. When his words and actions were too challenging for people many of the wider group of followers walked away. The long-term disciples knew that he loved them and so they kept following faithfully. In so doing they were continuing the tradition of faithful following set by their faith-ancestor Abram. He in his response to the call to leave home and journey did not know where it would lead to. So too with the disciples who responded to Jesus’ call to leave the security of family, friends, job and familiar routine. Their courage in following took them into a new relationship and they were no longer the persons they once were. They were honoured by God and Jesus with new names to reflect their new identities. Abram was now Abraham; Simon was now Peter.

The road and mountain events happened in otherwise ordinary present moments for the disciples. No one expects to have their lives turned upside down and inside out during an ordinary walk along a country road or a climb up a hill. That however is exactly what happened. After the events on the road and the mountaintop nothing could be the same for Jesus and the disciples.

The road and mountaintop moments were significant in another way. Together they divided the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke into two distinct halves. In Matthew the confession of Peter and the mountain top experience is a few chapters past the middle, in Mark it is right in the middle and in Luke a few chapters before the middle. In each of the three however it is the point where the ministry of Jesus changes significantly.

Before these events took place, the ministry of Jesus had been mostly in Galilee. His ministry from now on would take place on the way to Jerusalem.

The ‘audience’ who heard Jesus and made their assessment of his message was different before and after the transfiguration. Before this Jesus spoke to crowds large and small, to anyone who would hear what he has to say. He interacted with families and religious authorities, tradesman, fishermen and labourers, soldiers, sex workers and tax collectors. He was prepared to accept anyone’s invitation to dinner if he could communicate the welcoming love of God. After the road and mountain moments, Jesus spoke mostly to his disciples.

His message was different before and after the road and mountain moments. In Galilee Jesus spoke of the kingdom of God. He demonstrated the transformative power of the kingdom in mighty works. After these events however, the heart of his message was about himself, his coming suffering death and resurrection, about the impending judgement of God and the necessity for living faithfully in the present moment.

After Peter’s statement of faith on the road, Jesus had to take the disciples to another level in their understanding and following. Until then they had followed him even when they couldn’t understand a lot of his teaching. He now had to keep them together and trusting him through the experience of his arrest, trial and death. When they began their journey with Jesus they signed up to follow a conventional Jewish Messiah, one whose enemies were known and who could be tackled with a big enough army with swords. Now they would have to incorporate into their Messiah-understanding an apparent failure as well as an enemy other than Rome. Part two of the Gospel story as they headed for the events of Good Friday and Easter Day would prove to be a far tougher here and now for Jesus and his followers.

Think about - life-long learning as you follow Jesus

His first faithful disciples became life-long learners as they followed Jesus before and after his death and resurrection. The longer they followed the more they became used to rearranging their beliefs and understandings. Jesus wasn’t changing however; their understanding of him and of themselves, was becoming clearer. This has to be the way for his followers today. We must strive to understand more of who Jesus was and is, of how God’s purposes were and are being fulfilled in Jesus.

The term ‘life-long learning’ has been popular with management and organisational experts as a means of describing our need to change gradually in response to the changing contexts that we live and work in. The most obvious way that this happens for us today is our every-changing technological environment. We have adjusted to life with computers and mobile phones and the internet. In the same way we must be open to change and growth as we follow Jesus. God’s Holy Spirit is our change-agent helping us to adjust so that we become more Christ-like as we keep on following.

We must grow too in our knowledge of God and Jesus. All our knowledge and understanding of God is provisional and subject to extension and improvement. We know enough to be assured of salvation and God’s acceptance but must be open to the Holy Spirit’s growth-power. We are called to trust and follow in spite of what we don’t know about Jesus. Unlike the many who once followed him until they found a reason not to, we are called to exercise faith and hope in order to keep going.

Think about – the importance of rest for Jesus and his disciples

Jesus understood the need for regular rest periods and the Gospels mention him taking the disciples aside, away from the crowds, to have a break. This was the Jewish way – or at least the Jewish ideal. The brief time that the disciples had with Jesus and the Old Testament heroes on the mountain was intended to take them briefly out of their busy present; they were given a moment of respite and, un-expectedly, a moment of heaven. Sadly for them, the heroes departed, and the glory of Jesus faded. They had to come down to the other disciples, to a father desperate for his son’s healing and to a new round of discipleship learning.

In the time of Jesus the Jewish community had a weekly rhythm of work with a Sabbath day rest at the end. This intended relax-day became anything but that because it was complicated by a raft of behavioural rules and regulations. Sabbath however was first and foremost a regular break so that people could return to their routines of living with renewed strength and enthusiasm. Sabbath as a time of rest and recuperation had been mandated for hundreds of years as a required aspect of their community life and following of God. It was written into their scriptures and enshrined in their laws.

Exodus 20.10-11 But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

Human beings were created as bearers of God’s image. They are intended to be God-like in our relationships and our commitment to holy living . . . and if God felt the need to relax and enjoy what had been created then we are mandated to do the same. Jesus understood this and was committed to a regular period of rest and refreshment.

Think about - rest breaks for workers and followers

For people engaged in challenging intense work, the need for regular breaks is critical. Workers have tea and lunch breaks each day. Full time workers have a day or two off each week and fly-in/fly-out workers may have a week on and a week off. There is annual leave and long service leave. All of this is intended to make for a happier, healthier and more productive workforce. During the Vietnam war the term ‘R and R’ was well known as thousands of American soldiers and sailors flooded into Sydney and Brisbane. No one can continue to engage in intense engagement with their present moments without a refreshment break.

Many people however rarely if ever get a break when they are caring for others. Single parents, mothers with infants and carers of disabled and aged family members are often overwhelmed with the constant demands of those in their care. Respite for carers of frail aged and physically and mentally infirmed peopled is a critical issue for their physical and emotional wellbeing.

Today’s followers of Jesus are no different in their need for regular time out. We too require rest time for our bodies and minds but we also require time out to process our experiences of following Jesus and to recharge our faith-batteries. Clergy have a tradition of annual retreat where they go away by themselves or with others for several days or weeks of rest and reflection. This is a great privilege not often afforded other followers today. Youth camps can help young followers in this way and more and more parishes see the need for annual retreats for the adults. The Cursillo movement has helped in this regard too.