

God gives us a future

Mark 9:2-10

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TRANSFIGURATION

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In his unusual work, Einstein's Dreams (published in 1993), the novelist Alan Lightman presents a number of fictional dreams attributed to the great physicist, Albert Einstein. Set in Switzerland in 1905, we encounter the young genius in the process of creating his theory of relativity when he imagines new concepts of time. Each vision or dream presents a different world where humans subsequently behave in many different ways.

Lightman's work is quite evocative as we are challenged to think about how we view and experience time. In one of Einstein's dreams time is circular. Like ants crawling around the rim of a glass, life circles back on itself. Here there is no future. Life goes round and round. Life goes nowhere. There nothing to look forward to. There is nothing to hope for.

In another dream time is fixed and stagnant. Here there is no freedom of choice. Each action is determined or already chosen. There is no right or wrong. As one commentator says, "*no person is responsible.....the rooms are already arranged*".

Other dreams concern situations where time stands still. Here there are only moments frozen in time as people cling to simply what is. In another case time passes slowly. Here people come to fear change. Then there is the scenario where there is no past. Here, there is no memory of what has gone before and people, subsequently, live only in and for the present.

In a rather quirky scenario, time passes more slowly at high altitudes. So people start living on mountain tops while a further scenario presents time branching out into parallel worlds. Here there are multiple realities, all different and presenting a variety of consequences and outcomes. C.S Lewis is famous for presenting such parallel universes in his classic series, the Chronicles of Narnia.

But for us, time is linear. There is the past that has formed us, there is the present in which we live and experience life, and there is the future where we look forward to, either with fear or in hope – or both.

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This morning we encounter a story from Mark's Gospel that has all the dimensions of an Alan Lightman novel or one of C.S.Lewis's colourful, exotic tales. Jesus, together with three of his disciples, goes up a high mountain. While one of Einstein's dreams speaks of time moving more slowly at high altitudes and people, therefore residing in such places, this is not the motive behind Jesus' sojourn!

However, mountain tops can be special places. Celtic tradition speaks of "thin places", places where heaven and earth come so much closer and where pilgrims can receive a glimpse of the glory of God. Often such places are found on mountain tops and, as we read the story of the transfiguration, no doubt the Celtic concept of a "thin place" comes to mind as Jesus is embodied in the glory of God and as Jesus shines in the majesty of God.

On the other hand, the story of transfiguration, with its dazzling white glow and its divine voice, could lead us into thinking this is a story about alternative realities or parallel universes. Here, we may be tempted to view the transfiguration of Jesus as surely an "other worldly" encounter drawing us into a dimension of time and experience that is clearly not of this world as we know it.

But these explanations are insufficient. There is more, much more to this story.

Mark 9:2 says Jesus was "transfigured before them". The term, "transfigured" comes from the Greek word, "metamorphosis" meaning to be completely changed or transformed. In this case, Jesus is "metamorphosed" or "transformed" from one form into another.

Now, this is actually not a story about alternative realities or parallel universes. Neither is it simply a story about "thin places", although there is a very strong sense this transfiguration narrative concerns such a place.

Rather, this remarkable story has a much bigger focus and it has hugely bigger implications. These things concern the Christian understanding and hope of resurrection. For you see, Jesus' "metamorphosis", our Lord's transfiguration on that mountain is a prelude, a foretaste, a vision of what is to come – for both Jesus himself on that first Easter day – and for us as his followers living in 21st century.



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Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain is a prelude, a foretaste and a vision of his resurrection. Here we are given a glimpse of what will happen for Jesus in the near future. And here we are offered a glance or a peek of what we will encounter as we, too, are raised with Christ in God's good time to share in Jesus' resurrected life.

As the great St Paul says: *"We will not all die, but we will be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed."* (1 Corinthians 15:51-52).



In today's story we see something of this. For, the story of the transfiguration is a story that informs us about the future, a future where Jesus is raised from the dead at Easter. In today's story we turn our eyes towards the tortured, mortal body of Jesus which is raised up to take a new form that brings into being a time where evil is overcome, where death is defeated and where the truths and the values of God's way of doing things reign supreme.

Now this is heavy stuff. We don't talk a lot about resurrection. It's a tricky, somewhat difficult subject. But it's important. It's vital to our Christian faith and to our living out of that faith every day. I make this claim because the vision of Jesus raised from the dead and the promise of our own resurrection as followers of Christ is fundamental to the way we make sense of who we are, of what we are doing and where we are going.

And this means time involves a movement ever forward where our frail, earthly bodies are transformed, where, out of the angst and confusion of this present age, we will be gifted a time of fulfilment and joy, where - who we are, what we do and where we are going - will be metamorphosed into something far richer and meaningful than anything we can comprehend today.

This, my friends, means our faith and our life in Christ does not involve a circular view of life where we feel we are simply going round and round and getting nowhere. This, my friends, means our faith and life in Christ does not bind us to a stagnant approach to things where we are merely cogs in a wheel, living lives without consequences or meaning.

Indeed such a view brings into focus the futility of seeking to live at "high altitudes" to avoid the consequences of aging or to pursue parallel universes and multiple realities to take away the anxiety and pain of life.

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The foretaste of what is to come, as presented to us in the story of the transfiguration of Jesus, this prelude of resurrection and life beyond the confines of this present world, is a matter that is central to Christian faith. It's a radical, revolutionary matter that literally shakes things up and overturns the prevailing norms and the values of these times.

This is so because such a matter causes us to live life and face the future with a real sense of hope and expectation. This is so because we are inspired to constantly look forward, beyond the woes and the sorrows of this age to a better time. And here we claim evil can, and will, be overcome. Here we profess suffering and death will be defeated. Here we assert everything Jesus embodied – truth, justice, peace, compassion, mercy and grace – will ultimately triumph - despite this mortal world's attempts to do otherwise.

With this in mind, it's important to understand why we celebrate transfiguration on this particular Sunday, the beginning of the week during which the season of Lent begins.

For you see, today we catch a glimpse of what is to come. But as we begin Lent on this coming Ash Wednesday, we firstly admit our mortality and we become aware of our vulnerabilities. This is why we place ashes on our foreheads. Ash Wednesday identifies the present realities and the absolute vulnerabilities in which we all live. But this is not the end of the story – it's only the beginning.

Then as Lent gets underway we are invited to set our faces metaphorically towards Jerusalem and make that journey with Jesus through the experience of sadness, angst, denial, betrayal, accusation, rejection and the brutal violence of the cross to finally reach that day of resurrection when life is transformed, as goodness and mercy, grace and love reach out to inhabit the whole world with an absolute sense of hope!

Martin Luther King is a marvellous example here. In his quest for the transformation of his fledgling society where civil rights were under attack and racism was rampant, King pointed to the image of the promised land. It was that hope of a promised land which formed and shaped the people of ancient Israel. It was that hope of justice and the end of racism in the United States which propelled Martin Luther King. It is our hope of resurrection in Christ that gives shape to who we are today. It is that which takes us forward beyond the deathly things of our times to focus on that which is new and hopeful.



...And I've looked over, and I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the promised land. So I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man.

(Martin Luther King, Jr.)

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So, friends, what about you? What does it mean for you to live as person gifted with the promise of resurrection? What does it mean for us as congregation here in West Epping to bear witness to, and embrace, resurrection hope?

For you see, we are not a social club. We are not a group of people chosen by God to be simply nice to one another or pamper each other. We are not an exclusive mob who are better than all those out there who couldn't be bothered with the church. We are not a community set aside to preserve to the status-quo, to act as guardians of self-seeking conservatism or be activists promoting irresponsible leftist agendas.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we are people called by God with the promise of, not just a past and present. We are gifted with a future. And that future is one of hope as things will be different, as everything will be good. Death will be no more. Peace and justice will reign. Mercy and grace will be currency of life. The risen, victorious Lord will reign.

Now, this is big vision stuff as God calls us to move beyond the temptation to be insular, apathetic or tokenistic about faith. This is a broad view of life as we are challenged not to be self-focussed, parochial, shy or aloof in what we do. This is a far-reaching, all-embracing summons which says we should not, in our common witness, strive to simply embrace the lowest common denominator or seek to find the easiest and most comfortable way forward.

As your minister, this is my vision. This is my hope. I say this because I passionately believe God is calling us to be a resurrection people. Resurrection stands at the heart of who we are and what we do. And friends, Transfiguration Sunday is a prelude to all of this. It's a foretaste and a vision of all that God promises.

Friends God gives us a future. So, seize it, celebrate it and live it - today!

Amen.

