

“Passing the Torch” – Luke 9:28-43 (Transfiguration Sunday)

I suspect most if not all of us were among the some three billion people watching the opening ceremonies on Friday evening. All in all it was well done, even with a technical glitch and some issues over content and style. While I’ve not been a great fan of the way due process has been trodden roughshod into the melting snow, while watching the ceremonies on TV I was still proud to be a Canadian hosting these spectacular events. I was surprisingly satisfied with the way that the choice of the “final” torch handing-off was settled – having a balanced set of “final” torch-bearers accepting the flame from Rick Hansen, the “Man in Motion” seemed a particularly Canadian solution. And of course, the “Great One” as Wayne Gretzky is well known as for his outstanding feats in hockey was accorded just that tiny edge by carrying on to light the flame down by the waterfront, and so the great hockey nation was also satisfied.

You probably know that I choose the title for my sermon early in the week, and so when I looked again at our gospel text in the midst of the hoopla concerning the last few days of the Olympic flame, the image of passing the torch seemed a natural fit with those mountain-top events associated with Transfiguration Sunday, the passing of the mantle of God’s covenant passing from Moses and Elijah – the embodiment of the Law and the Prophets for believers in Jesus’ day – to Jesus, the embodiment of the New Covenant.

When you hear this story of the Transfiguration do you not have at least a bit of sympathy for the disciples? After all, they’ve been thrown into direct contact with the true glory of God – and they’ve been left speechless. Poor Peter does manage to blurt out an offer of faithful hospitality, and under the circumstances that is miracle enough, for how could anyone know what to say during or even after an experience such as this one? To be sure, the disciples have by now spent a lot of time with Jesus, and they had even been witnesses to the strange voice at his baptism several years ago, and they had seen with their own eyes how he had cured even the lame and the blind and the lepers, but I’d bet they’d never even dreamed of a moment like this one. High on a mountain, dozey with lack of sleep, and all of a sudden they’re faced with a close encounter of the weird kind! In a very X-Files kind of happening, Jesus’ face changes, his clothes glow in an indescribable light, and he begins chatting with two newly-appeared figures who can only be Moses and Elijah, the very definition of the Law and the Prophets. Who could begin to describe such an event? Who would even dare to talk about it afterwards? It’s no wonder that Luke reports that the disciples kept it to themselves – wouldn’t you keep silent about it, for fear of being committed to the nearest institution?

But as if all that wasn’t enough to jangle the minds of the disciples, the climax of this event certainly must have stunned them, because again they heard the voice of God – once more proclaiming that Jesus was truly the Son of God, his Chosen One, his beloved. The last time they heard that divine proclamation was at his baptism. It was only three years ago, but it must have seemed like a lifetime, as so much had gone on in the meantime. The baptism was the beginning, and the voice had confirmed the truth of what was to come. Now Jesus had just forecast for them how it would end tragically, and here was the voice once again. Could this be another confirmation of the truth of what was to come, what he had told them about how the Son of Man would suffer, and die, and be raised again on the third day? Too horrible to contemplate, too awful to even think about, and more than the disciples could bear.

And then – silence. Silence as you find only on a mountain top, broken only by the haunting whisper of the wind bearing untold past secrets and yet-to-be-dreamed dreams.

And then the trauma of crashing back to earth, for mountain-top experiences never last. Even if the impact of those experiences remain firmly with us, the experiences themselves must end – we do

not live on mountain tops. The disciples were no different, and soon it was time for them to come down the mountain, back into the valleys of real life, back into the places that seem less holy.

Down from the mountain, ears still ringing with the affirming voice of God, Jesus and the disciples come directly into the din of the unruly mobs of people, all clamoring for relief. “Help us”, they cry to Jesus. “We asked your disciples to help us, and they couldn’t, or wouldn’t”. Whether the disciples were still stunned by the enormity of what had just happened, or whether they were totally self-absorbed in reliving the experience for themselves, basking in the afterglow, we do not know, but whatever the reason the disciples were not able to satisfy the noisy demands of the crowd, and so it fell upon Jesus.

And here we have one of those troublesome yet delightful little items in scripture, one of those quotations that cause some people to squirm in the pews. If your picture of Jesus is that of a “gentle Jesus, meek and mild,” a Messiah who never frowned, much less ever spoke harshly, then you might well have some trouble as here he snaps at those people asking for help with what surely sounds like frustration with, “you faithless and perverse generation, how much longer do I have to be with you, and put up with you?” Wow! No PR media spin here. Jesus sounds so harsh, so unlike the ever-smiling picture that people like to impose upon him. Oh, sure, we can handle him trashing the merchants in the temple – we can dismiss his rage there as being targeted at the unrighteous, the non-churched, if you will – but here, these are people just like us, suffering with hardships, simply asking for help. His reply grates and is harsh, but the very harshness of it gives this whole episode a ring of truth and anchors this whole weird episode in reality. I suppose we might understand why Jesus was a tad testy at this point if we remember that he has just discussed with Moses and Elijah what was to come for him in the very near future, what the path would look like to the cross, to death and beyond?

But by the grace and mercy of God the story didn’t end with harshness. Jesus didn’t stomp off away from the crowds, leaving them disappointed and hurt. With the infinite compassion that filled him, he healed the boy who had been brought to him, casting out the demon with but a word, and sending him on his way cured, and full of life, and “all were astounded at the greatness of God.” Indeed, all were also astounded at the power and grace of God so clearly evident in Jesus. And as we know, the disciples subsequently pulled up their socks (or retied their sandals since they probably weren’t wearing socks, but you know what I mean), and although they faltered a few more times, they did stop basking in the afterglow of this profound event and even more profoundly accompanied Jesus in his journey to the cross, were witnesses to his resurrection, and proclaimed his word of grace and mercy until they were themselves granted entry into the eternal presence of Moses, Elijah, and all the saints.

That down-from-the-mountaintop incident that followed the passing of the torch from Moses and Elijah to Jesus also provides us with a profound model for our own discipleship. Many today within the Christian faith want to remain basking in the afterglow of their mountaintop experience of discovering that Jesus is the Son of God. Both in worship and in their daily lives they seek to relive over and over again the high point of their initial intimate contact with God, humming to themselves how they and Jesus walked in the garden alone and nobody else could ever share such an experience. They seek to remain firmly on the brightly-lit mountaintop, hanging on to a torch, listening for a thunderous voice to reassure them of the rightness of their revelation, while at the same time they are unable to hear the cries of the people down in the shadowy valleys crying for comfort, for food, for sustenance, for acceptance, for reassurance, for life.

It’s a bit saddening also to see how many congregations fail to recognize the distinction this text is drawing between the reaction of Peter on the mountain top and the reaction of Jesus come down from the mountain. I think we all know of or have encountered congregations who react to an

encounter with the Holy in the same way that Peter did initially, and not only erect a magnificent booth but continue to worship their building until their congregation dies out from irrelevance. Any congregation that has fallen into worshipping its building as their central essence of discipleship has failed to hear the clear instruction from God to listen to his Son Jesus. And what are they, and we, to hear from Jesus? Clearly a message of mission to and with the people, the frustrating, needy and demanding people of this world crying out in their helplessness for help.

If we have heard the message that Jesus is the Son of God, if we wish to model our lives after his in response to his call to become one with him, we need to come down off the mountaintops, to walk with him among the people clamoring for his love and affection. The flame of God's love for people will burn long after any human torches have gone cold and dark. We live in the afterglow of the discovery of God's love for us in Christ Jesus, but we are called to do more than bask in that afterglow. We are called to let that warm, loving light shine forth; called to pass the torch of God's love to others; called to hear and respond to the cries of people desperately searching for meaning and acceptance and freedom from the demons that seek to destroy them; and called to bring the healing word and love of Christ to them.

From space, the earth looks beautiful, and pristine and pure. But even on the space station, we cannot remain apart from the earth, and must at some point return to the place from where we draw sustenance. From the top of a mountain the surrounding country also looks beautiful, serene, majestic and imperial; yet even as inspiring as a mountain top is, we cannot remain there. As warm and snugly as the first realization that God loves us enough to send his Son to rescue us is, we cannot remain there. We live mostly in valleys, and on plains, and hollows, and uphill, and our world is filled with noise and commotion and demanding people – the very people God loves and the very people to whom God sent his Son full of power and grace. To be sure, there will always be more mountaintop moments, indeed we all face one day a very exciting ultimate mountaintop experience of being reunited with the saints, but until that day we are called to live out our lives living out our faith in the afterglow, proclaiming and demonstrating the love, the forgiveness, the grace, the mercy so miraculously given to us first by God in Christ Jesus his Son, through whom we offer all thanks and praise.