

“Science, Faith, and Meaning” – Mt 17:1-9 – 2Pet 1:16-21

“Honest, we’re not making this stuff up!” That’s what Peter was saying ... well, he was using more biblical language, of course. “We saw it with our own eyes ... we heard it with our own ears!” That’s Peter affirming the truth of the event that was much later described more fully in Matthew’s gospel. And that very act of affirming tells us something both interesting and important – namely that at least some, or perhaps many, people were already skeptical about the tales of the event we call the Transfiguration. “We did not follow cleverly devised myths”, is how Peter put it – today we would hear, “we couldn’t make this stuff up!”, or even “it’s all Fake News!” Peter obviously was facing off against critics who were claiming that the events of the Transfiguration couldn’t have happened. Those events being, of course, the incident on the mountain during which Moses and Elijah appeared, Jesus and his clothing shone with brilliant white light, and the voice of God declared from the heavens that, “This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

It would be and is easy for us to nod and agree with Peter’s skeptics that the events of this incident are too bizarre to be believed. After all, we know from TV commercials that clothes can become dazzling white, but only with that particular brand of detergent, but “face shone like the sun”? – give me a break - everyone knows that a person can’t glow like a light bulb, don’t they? It’s easy for us to be so skeptical because we are children of modern thought. We have inherited thoughts and ideas and writings all the way from the early Greek philosophers through the Age of Enlightenment. We live in a society in which rationality rules, logic reigns supreme, and science is the new religion.

So how then can we, do we, reconcile this skepticism with Peter’s declaration, “we were eyewitnesses of his majesty ... we ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain?” In the Age of Rational Thinking, most would simply declare at best they were only imagining things, or at worst they were either crazy – “the boy is touched!” – or offering “alternative facts”.

For me the best way to resolve this skepticism is to move beyond the age of reason and into the age of the “post-modern”, accepting the reality of the events without even fussing with the science or the logic or the rationality of it. After all, isn’t the world of science and rationality the very same group who at various times have declared, with absolute certainty, that the earth was flat; that the sun and the stars revolved around the earth; that people could never fly; that we could not travel faster than the speed of sound; that atoms could not be split, or merged? The list is endless of declarations of perfect scientific certainty about the universe in which we live, declarations of impossibilities that one-by-one have been knocked down and shown to be without foundation. Turn on a light switch – here in B.C. the electricity probably came from falling water but in many parts of the world the electricity came from not only splitting atoms but carefully controlling just how fast that happens.

The real issue, especially for people of faith but also for people of science and technology, is not whether this incident happened – instead the real issue for them, and indeed for us, is what did this incident on the mountain mean? Why did it happen? What did it signal?

In the first place, this incident provides a link with past faith, and a validation of Jesus set against the prophets and prophecy of the scriptures (what we now call the Old Testament). The appearance of Moses and Elijah, two of the great figures through whom God spoke to the people of ancient Israel, talking with Jesus is a stamp of authenticity, identifying Jesus as we still do as being the one announced by the prophets. Peter, in his letter, even states this explicitly, “So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed.”

Moreover, that mountain-top experience links with ‘present’ faith, with an explicit affirmation and validation of Jesus by God himself. Those who have not heard the voice of God can only take it on faith – however, those who have heard that voice will nod in wonder and awe and know, like Peter, that it happens and there is no way to prove it or even to explain it. It is a matter of faith.

Peter, trying to explain the importance of that mind-bending event, goes on to draw upon images of light, with a lamp shining in a dark place, and the morning star rising, signaling not only a new day but a new era in your hearts. His images of light are appropriate, especially set against the glowing image of Jesus as God affirms him as God’s own Son. That image of Christ glowing bright white caused me to think of God’s warm love being poured into Jesus in such quantity that he could not help but to glow. We are familiar with heat being expressed in terms of colour, and those terms are used in science and technology as well, ranging from describing the temperature of metal to the temperature of stars. We recognize ‘red hot’ of course from such familiar things as stove tops and BBQ’s. We are even familiar with ‘yellow hot’ in the form of everyday tungsten light bulbs. We can even relate to the brilliant white light of a carbon arc, as blue is added towards the top end of the spectrum. And finally we come to the “white hot love” of Christ – all the love that God has to offer, which is without limit, poured into Jesus until he literally glowed white with that love, ready to spread that light and love to the entire human race.

But this incident didn’t end there. That event also provided a link with ‘future’ faith, the faith of those who would respond to that incredible love in Christ. It began in a most unusual way – unusual in the sense that instead of those who witnessed such incredible glory crawling on their bellies toward the light, the light came to them, and in the person of Jesus touched them, and said (in those most profound of words), “fear not.” “Get up, and do not be afraid”, Jesus said to those who had been overwhelmed by this display of God’s reaching out to touch and redeem humanity, and they did.

Significantly, as they rose, and looked around, they saw no one except Jesus alone. The transfer was complete – authority and power from the prophets, validation from God Himself – all power of redemption and reconciliation was now vested in Jesus. Jesus was changed (transfigured), the whole relationship between God and the world was changed, and the disciples were changed. The change in Jesus was plain to see, with his face shining like the sun. God’s spoken declaration announced with great clarity that the relationship between God and the world had changed. Mind you, the change in the disciples was considerably less dramatic and much less complimentary. After all, falling to the ground and being overcome with terror is not exactly the kind of reputation that anyone would like to have passed around, much less written down and highlighted in public more than two thousand years later! But to be fair to those disciples we note they were redeemed by Christ’s gentle touch and command, and redeemed themselves in their following through over the years, not only to the cross but beyond in faithful service until their own deaths.

While we probably have not had nor do we expect to experience the kind of faith encounter that would cause us to fall prostrate to the ground in abject fear, we do share with the disciples that the one identified by the voice of God as the Son of God has also reached out to us, taking us gently by the hand, and saying to us, “do not be afraid.” We too, like them, have been touched by God in some way, and we strive to respond faithfully, in worship and in deed. The path to our reconciliation with God is illuminated for us by Christ; our days are made brighter and warmer by his constant closeness with us. The light of God’s love in Christ shines upon the world and for us the world is made more lovely as a result.

We also read in scripture that we are one with Christ in our faith, and so it is possible to believe that some of the light of that love has been poured into us as well. Perhaps that can be our prayer on this last Sunday before the Season of Lent, our prayer that God's Holy Spirit will help us to let that light shine forth from us in all that we do, that through our faith others may feel that they have also have been if not touched by God then at least witnessed that touch in action. May it be so.