

“White Hot Love” – Mt 17:1-9 – 2Pet 1:16-21

I hope that you will forgive me if I start talking in weird ways over the next couple of years. It looks like I will be going back to school this year – I haven’t heard officially, but I have applied to enter the Doctor of Ministry program at VST, and unless something goes terribly wrong I expect to be accepted. In the meantime I’m using the opportunity to take a free course at VST as a way to chip the rust flakes off my brain and re-enter the lofty and stratified air of a seminary.

I’ve attended a couple of classes so far, and already my head is swimming with the new academic vocabulary – I say ‘new’ because it’s been more than ten years since I was last engaged in this kind of activity, and both the concepts and the words used to describe them have changed. The latest buzz-word seems to be ‘post’, as in post-Christendom, or especially, post-modern. These terms refer to the realities first of all that we no longer live in a society identified as Christian, in which it could be assumed for example that everyone had at least an inkling of what the Christian story is, and secondly that we live in an age in which science and logic are themselves worshipped as the ultimate answers.

Now I react badly to the buzz words, but I do agree with the underlying concepts. Replacing our belief in God with a creed of belief in science and/or logic may seem to make sense at first, and our western world in particular has gone down that path for centuries. That western or Greek influence of enlightenment, of rational thinking, of science and mathematics and hard facts may even have been what Simeon Peter was dealing with in his letter. “For we did not follow cleverly devised myths”, is how he put it – today we might say instead, “we didn’t make this stuff up!” – as he apparently faced off against critics who were claiming that the events of the Transfiguration couldn’t have happened. Those events are, of course, the incident on the mountain, in which Moses and Elijah appear, Jesus and his clothing shine with brilliant white light, and the voice of God declares from the heavens that, “This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

Since we have inherited the thoughts and ideas and writings all the way from the early Greek philosophers through the Age of Enlightenment and through the recent Age of Independent Thought, it is easy for us to nod and agree with Peter’s skeptics (even that word comes from the Greeks of his day) 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 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?

How then 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, we would in our most kindly way have to declare that they were simply imagining things, or unkindly we would say they were either crazy or lying.

Well, I for one am willing to jump on the “post-modern” bandwagon, and move to accept 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 orbited the earth; that people could never fly; that we could not travel faster than the speed of sound; that all matter was indivisible, that atoms could not be split, or

merged – the list is endless of declarations of perfect 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 the light switch – here in B.C. the electricity probably came from a hydro generator, but in most 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 – the real issue 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.”

Secondly, the 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 – 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 explain it. One can, also like Peter, only affirm it.

Peter 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 some two thousand years later! But to be fair to them, 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.

Jesus was changed, and the relationship between God and the world was changed. And then Jesus, filled with the burning love of God for His people, in a scene that would be reflected later following his resurrection, touched the disciples, and they were changed. And now we in turn have also been touched by the risen Christ, and reassured of the gracious, loving and powerful goodness of God in him. We have been lifted up as those disciples were, redeemed and re-energized in our turn to walk with, talk with, and learn from Christ. We have been touched and restored and filled with the white hot love of God in Christ. It's now our turn, like Peter and the apostles and the people of faith stretching two thousand years and all around the earth, to come down off the mountain and go through the towns and the villages attesting to the redeeming power of God's love in Christ Jesus. It's our turn to continue that link with future faith, to proclaim with rejoicing and thanksgiving this miracle of the power and love and grace of God at work in us, so that generations to come may also hear the affirmation "this is my Son, my beloved", and that they may be touched, and changed, and redeemed, in turn.