

**Listen To Him – Or
The Message We Don't Want To Hear
Luke 9: 28-36
Lent 2, Year C
28 February 2010**

Some of the best advice about preaching I have ever received is about the importance of always surprising your audience as you begin. Seize their attention with some startling point so that they are left wondering – where is he coming from - where is this going – what connection can there possibly be with the reading we just heard? As curiosity builds up, and the tension increases, you have created the classic storytellers formula for success – an audience totally focussed on their need to know what comes next.

This curiosity thrilled the cat approach is all the more important when you have got a message to get across that the audience doesn't want to hear. What is then required is more than just clear communication – you must either beguile or shock your audience. They have to be shaken loose from their attachment to deeply held prejudices or convictions.

The shock and awe approach is the one taken by Jesus this morning. Eight days previously he has initiated a conversation with his disciples about who he really is. Only Peter got the right answer, but then he rather spoiled it by trying to argue Jesus out of his what next agenda surrounding their up coming trip to Jerusalem. So, what to do about the obtuseness and powerful inner resistance of the in-group to the reason for, and explanation of, a very difficult experience that is about to come their way?

Step one – cull out the inner core group of Peter, James and John, and take them away with you for a special experience. Step two – take them to a remote location and overwhelm them with a remarkable happening. Step three – anchor this out of the ordinary event in the most powerful symbols and history of Israel. Step four – get your loving heavenly Father to deliver the punch line in such an unmistakable way that even the most gormless will get it.

There are those of us, and I would count myself among them, who are deeply drawn to the mystical, supernatural side of religion. What a gourmet feast the Transfiguration is for us! It has got it all – Jesus glowing with uncreated light – the glorious three sharing insider information about what comes next – and a very satisfactory denouement as the cloud comes down over the scene with a powerful fade out message from God himself.

Those of us with a taste for the transcendent side of religion will be tempted, like Peter, to hang on to the front end of the story. He

couldn't believe his luck as he saw the salvation history of Israel passing in review in front of him in this magical scene that wonderfully recaptured the beginning of their religion on Mount Sinai. As Moses and Elijah turn away his heart felt reaction is – “don't go guys, I will put up some tents for you!”

But that is not where the vital part of this event lies. Sure, it has got the attention of those three cowering down the mountain. And the content of the Moses, Elijah, and Jesus conversation was important for Peter, James and John to hear. But as ever in a gospel scene the important question to ask is – where is the punch line, and what is it? In this case it comes right at the end – it consist of three words – “listen to him.”

The listen up message that will follow is about suffering love. It is about how a perfect, God centred life is about to come into tragic and inevitable collision with the forces of evil that rule this world. It is about how this blood-splattered road to the cross will turn out to be the path to glory. It is about the truth that this destiny of cross bearing applies also to the disciples. And here is the really disagreeable part of the message – it is about the fact that cross bearing is an inescapable part of our Christian witness too.

I have called this sermon, “Listen to him – or the message we don't want to hear.” I guess we might be inclined to think that being a Christian adds up to going to Church, being kind to people, and having good values. If so, then we will be as disinclined as the disciples to hearing that there is this extra dimension of taking on board suffering love as part of our vocation. “Take that nasty cross away, no more cross bearing for me today,” is likely to be our honest reaction to this news.

Karl Rahner once said that many Christian lives are full of boredom, frustration and disappointments. If such a burden of living can be accepted in a Christ like spirit then this too can become a form of cross bearing, providing that we do not give way to self-pity, or shut ourselves off from the possibility of a more adventurous form of Christian living. And sometimes cross bearing comes in to our lives in dramatic and unexpected ways.

The Bishop's clergy letter this past week tells us that Malcolm Harris, the Vicar of our neighbouring parish of Burwood, has just been told that the operation he was expecting for pancreatic cancer wont be possible because the cancer has gone too far. The way in which he and his family will have received this news, and the journey he has set out on towards the end of his life on this side of the Kingdom, will have been, and will be, an invitation to cross bearing in an acute way.

The counter insurgency war in Northern Ireland had a strange double-edged quality to it. Public opinion and public sympathy was a key factor. Sometimes when you won you lost. An SAS unit successfully ambushed and wiped out an IRA attack unit in spectacular fashion while it was attacking a police station. The funerals that followed were a fertile recruiting ground for the IRA. A crucial tipping point came later in the response of one particular Protestant family to the loss of a young family member in a gone wrong bomb attack. With calm dignity the Father told the media that amidst their grief and anger at the loss of a beloved child was their awareness of the way in which the perpetrators had placed themselves in spiritual peril as a result of this tragedy, and of their desire that they not be cut off from God's mercy as a result, and of their hope that this senseless death would in some way contribute to the return of peace to their unhappy province. Covert support for further terrorist operations drained away in the months that followed.

When Jesus died he did something to death. We will be hearing more about that as Holy Week approaches. For now what we need to get our heads around is that the Christian hope is not that we are delivered from death, but that we go through death to a glory beyond. And that right from the beginning the Christian Church believed that in some circumstances suffering and death could be what it called *martyria* – witness.