

## **Sermon 23 February 2020**

### **The Jesus I Never Knew**

**Readings: Exodus 24: 12-18; 2 Peter 1: 16-21; Mathew 17: 1-9**

#### **FSHS**

Today we focus on the transfiguration. And there are two pictures of transfiguration in our readings today – the first is the picture of Moses on Mt Sinai as he encounters the holiness of God. The second picture is of Jesus on a mountain top with a handful of his disciples. There, Jesus is transfigured before them as they come to see the holiness of God in Him.

In both stories, the ones who witness the transfigurations are transformed themselves, by the new insights they gain about the mystery of God, and who God really is.

A short story for you that goes some way to explaining what happened at the transfiguration of Jesus.

**Sometimes we think we know someone, until we see another side of them that changes our whole perception of them.**

When I was at Knox Theological Hall, Knox College, I met a fellow student by the name of Alistair McBride. Alistair has just retired from full-time ministry, and it with his permission that I share this story.

You will see how wrong I can be about people that I think I know.

During our student days I always thought Alistair McBride was a bookworm. He was a lovely guy and we got on well. But I always saw Ally as a bit of a bookworm and intellectual. I also knew that he had a social conscience. He was a member of a student political party. And he was very involved in student politics on the university of Otago campus.

Like most of us in the late 70s, Ally had longish hair and a beard, (I didn't have a beard – but did have a cool moustache and an afro hairstyle). Ally always seemed to wear the same black duffle coat, even on hot days. During our lectures you could see Ally in the corner of the classroom, tugging softly on his beard, deep in thought, slouched over his chair a bit like a cat, eyes fixed on the lecturer. The classroom and the library seemed to be Ally's natural habitat (especially since he was a former secondary school teacher). His world was the world of the intellect and the spirit. The only times I came across Ally, were in lectures, the Chapel, Knox social occasions, or in the library.

**I never ever thought of Alistair as a sports person, until** years into our respective ministries, when I happened to see a picture of Alistair in the newspaper. He was holding a handful of medals and smiling. And the caption on the newspaper told me that Alistair was a New Zealand champion in the sport of fencing and swordsmanship.

**That newspaper article and the picture of Alistair with a handful of medals changed my whole perception of him. Turned my image of Alistair on its head.**

**I no longer saw him as a bookworm - but as a champion athlete!** There was more to Alistair than I ever gave him credit for. I was wrong about him! And I wrote to him and told him so after I read the newspaper article.

**And I asked him if I could use his story** to help explain the Transfiguration.

**You see, that is what happened in the Transfiguration Story in Mathew.** The disciples went up a mountain with Jesus, thinking that they knew all about Jesus, until they encountered him in a different way. And they returned from their mountain-top experience with a totally changed perception of who Jesus was.

**In Hebrew history, God spoke to the Hebrew people in two ways:** One way, was through the Laws of Moses and the second way God spoke to the Hebrews, was through the prophets like Elijah, who was considered one of the greatest prophets.

**On that day, up on the mountain top, for the first time, the disciples saw Jesus as someone who embodied both the Law and the Prophets.** They realised that Jesus was not just a great rabbi – Jesus was the One who embodied the Law of Moses and the Voice of the prophets in his being and in his teaching. In Christian language – ‘The Word of God had become flesh’. And that is still how we in the church regard Jesus – God’s Word personified in a human life.

**In 1994, A scholar called Marcus Borg wrote a best-selling book called, “Meeting Jesus Again For The First Time”.** In his book Marcus Borg described how his perception of Jesus was shaped by his upbringing in the American Lutheran Church. From his earliest days in Sunday school, he met the very traditional image of Jesus that is summarised in the Apostles Creed. The exalted Christ of the early church, “seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, from whence he shall come to judge the living and the dead”

**To cut a long story short,** Borg found that as he grew older, he couldn’t relate to the traditional, exalted image of Christ. It forced him to become what he called, a ‘closet atheist’ because the exalted images did not connect with his or our modern worldview.

Borg began a search for the historical Jesus – the pre-Easter Jesus, the human Jesus. **Borg came to see Jesus the man, as a ‘Spirit – bearer’, a champion of social change. And as the founder of a movement who invited people to enter a journey of transformation. A journey that involved giving one’s heart to the spirit of Christ and becoming a person of compassion.**

**Around about the same time** that Borg wrote his book, a liberal evangelical called **Philip Yancey**, also wrote a best-seller called by a similar title, “*The Jesus I Never Knew*”. Yancey also tried to uncover the historical Jesus and like Marcus Borg, re-discovered the Jewishness of Jesus, as opposed to the Western/Italian images we have of Jesus. Yancy found the search very challenging and faith strengthening.

Both Borg and Yancy (unsurprisingly) concluded that **social justice, compassion, transformation, counterculture and the mystery of God, were all at the heart of Jesus' teaching.**

**All of these central beliefs were present in Jesus own life, and in the life of the early Christian community. But as Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire,** the exalted imperial images of Christ became the more and more popular, replacing the lowly Jesus with his central teachings of social justice, compassion, transformation, living counterculturally and in awe of the mystery of God.

**Scholars like Borg and Yancy and Eugene Petersen** have tried to take us back to the Jesus we never knew growing up, in even in church, where the humble human spirit-bearing Jesus was lost in the images of the exalted imperial Jesus.

**One of the most memorable phrases that Borg uses at the start of his book is, "All theology begins as 'autobiography'"**.

In other words, our journey begins with 'God and You' - Each one of us has a personal story of how we arrived at faith in Christ. The faith we learned in Sunday School, or at the feet of our parents, was a great beginning, but as we grow and experience life, our perception of God changes.

**Much like the story I began with about my friend Alistair Mc Bride,** there are things about God that you and I don't know. Things that we have missed, or things that have missed us, that are still to be discovered. The God we know may be much more than we ever thought possible.

But we are on a journey, and we may not have reached the mountain top yet. God is still obscured by a cloud, but we continue to look upwards and inwards to find that God.

I'll finish with a quote from William Barclay, who said, "It is enough to get our head into the heavens, without trying to fit the heavens into our heads."

**FSHS Amen**