

“The Transfiguration of all things” Rev. Nathan Parry
Aug 6th 2023: Transfiguration Sunday / Peace Sunday

So, today is August 6th. In the Church calendar this is ‘the feast day’ celebrating the Transfiguration of Jesus – the story we heard read to us earlier from Luke 9:28-36.

I love history, and there is a bit of history to celebrating the Transfiguration today. It starts in 1453 with Sultan Mehmed II of the Ottoman Empire finally conquering the legendary city of **Constantinople**, the capital city of what remained of the Roman Empire.

Constantinople had been the largest Christian city in the world, though it had been much diminished by war. It also protected Europe from invasions out of Asia and had endured many sieges over the centuries (in this way it provided inspiration for the city of Minas Tirith in the Lord of the Rings). With its fall, *2,000 years* of the Roman Empire came to an end.

It was a big deal!

Also, all wars are brutal. War is, after all, about trying to *kill* people, and this siege was no different. Europe was now open to Mehmed’s armies: who would be next, which cities would burn, who would next suffer the horrors of invasion?

A few smaller states like Serbia were next in line, before the Ottomans moved on Hungary. The Hungarians were at a disadvantage in that they didn’t know where the Ottomans would attack, so they had to spread their army out, whereas the Ottomans could focus *all* of their very large army on one place, which was Belgrade.

There was another epic siege, whereby using deceit and cunning, the defenders, many of whom were ordinary townsfolk, held out long enough for the Hungarian army to arrive. That army, though, was *also* largely just farmers armed with pitchforks, come to defend their homes and families.

No-one knows exactly what happened, but it seems that Mehmed II tried to lay a trap by retreating. The Hungarian peasants wouldn’t obey orders and didn’t act as expected. There was chaos, and as the day ended, the Ottoman army was defeated. All of Europe *rejoiced!* The Ottomans could be defeated; their advance had been stopped; doom was not imminent, prayers had been answered... To commemorate this day and give thanks to God, August 6th was then set aside by the Church to celebrate the Transfiguration of Jesus – a date birthed out of war.

The story of the Transfiguration, itself, however, obviously has *nothing* to do with war! In the story, Jesus takes a small group of his disciples up a mountain to pray. As usual the disciples struggle to engage in prayer for as long as Jesus, and they start falling asleep.

Before they drop off though, suddenly they see Jesus **transfigured** before them – Jesus suddenly starts *radiating light* from his whole being. The Light of God - the Light of glory, the Divine radiance - shines out of him, transforming his appearance.

As this happens, two Old Testament heroes appear there with him. Moses, who represents the Law, and Elijah, who represents the prophets. They are there speaking with Jesus about his ultimate destiny in

Jerusalem. In the midst of this glory and radiance, they are talking about the **grim path** of sacrifice that lies before Jesus.

Understandably the disciples are quite surprised by all of this, and Peter blurts out something dumb.

The mysterious dark **cloud of God's presence** then comes over them and they are terrified. From the cloud they hear God speak – “This is my Son, my beloved, listen to him.”

Powerful words and affirming words, and probably words Jesus appreciated hearing again as he sets out again on the road towards the cross. “This is my Son, my beloved, listen to him”

Now, bringing this home to **South Wellington** in 2018...

Somehow, some of us discovered a prayer and meditation lodge above Princess Bay, built by a visionary Anglican lady called **Kae Miller**. She built the lodge as a place of reflection, retreat and healing, and to foster replanting native bush on the South Coast (which was up until the 1980's just grass and gorse).

She passed away in the 1990's; her time above Princess Bay was the last season of her life. However, before she came here she had done *heaps!*

- She had fought to save native forest from logging,
- set up possibly New Zealand's first recycling centre at the Porirua tip,
- she had made properties she inherited available for rent by people suffering from schizophrenia,
- she set up space in her own home as a place of respite from those suffering from mental illness,
- she attempted a co-housing development
- and even way back in the 1930's she had spent time smuggling Jews out of Nazi Germany.

Kae Miller had quite a life! A life we want to celebrate and remember in our next CompassionFest – hopefully this October.

But as I read about her, a phrase stood out. She spoke of her motivating principle, her underlying vision as being the quest to seek “**the transfiguration of all things.**”

What does that mean? “The transfiguration of all things.”

And, how do you get from the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus *to a life of activism?* Rescuing refugees, giving shelter to those who suffer from mental illness, recycling our rubbish, preserving forests, restoring gorse-land to native bush, and establishing a place of retreat and reflection in Wellington City...

I have been pondering this phrase for a few years now, this “seeking the transfiguration of all things.” Her family have been helpful in steering me to some other writings, and I think I'm getting there. And I think it's a really profound concept.

Now, ages ago a **mystic tradition** developed around the Transfiguration, largely in Eastern Christianity.

For...

We believe that Jesus was both God and human, a bridge between Creation and Creator. Accordingly, it was easier for his divine nature, the Light of God that was within him, to shine forth, transfiguring him before his disciples.

But! This tradition emphasises that *this Light of God dwells in all natural things*. People, animals, trees,

mountains, rocks – the Light of God transfuses all things. Just beneath the surface, just out of sight, just around the corner... glory and divine radiance surrounds us and indwells us always.

Remembering how Jesus was transfigured both as he **prayed**, and **reflected** before God on his **sufferings** on the cross yet to come, this tradition holds that we too can be transfigured to some degree as we surrender ourselves to God in both prayer and sacrifice.

There are legends of saints shining brightly with the Light of God as Jesus did! Are they true? I don't know, but I'm sure many of us can think of people we have known, who in a much smaller way, nonetheless shone with the radiance and grace of God.

For, in God we live and move and have our being. God's light is within us, and it can shine out of us in words and deeds, but also through our eyes and hands and faces. I have been privileged to know such people who seemed to shine with the love of God.

It seems to me that Kae Miller held to that concept, along with the Eastern Orthodox belief in **the redemption of all things**.

When Western Protestants think about the 2nd coming of Jesus and the end of the age, we have tended to think of this world being *destroyed*.

That's kind of what I was taught. When Jesus comes back this world will have served its purpose and will be done away with, while we go live with God in heaven.

However, I have come to see that the Bible is pretty clear in teaching the **redemption and restoration of all things**, including this world, and not its destruction. That is a belief that was largely retained in the Eastern Church and is being rediscovered in the West.

When linked to the idea of the Transfiguration, it is held that the process of the restoration of Creation will see the unleashing of the Light of God in all things.

Sin will be purged away. Anything broken or cruel or dark or polluting, the things that hold back the Light of God from shining forth out of Creation will be done away with, and *all things will finally shine with the glory of God as they were made to do*.

That is "the Transfiguration of all things."

The 2nd coming of Jesus and the end of this age will reveal the Divine Light, God's glory shining out of a renewed Creation, bringing the transfiguration of all things – including ourselves...

That's a beautiful future hope, eh? It'll be awesome when God just comes down and does all that for us...

But... It seems that Kae Miller held to that **future hope**, but, in it, she found the inspiration to go out *and do stuff herself*. To recycle old furniture and old clothes; find homes for the refugee and the marginalised, and to plant trees.

She brought this future hope into the **present** with *tangible actions of compassion*, actions that sought a better future for everyone and all of Creation. It seems that she believed that when life flourished, then the world was being transfigured, now, in our own time!

So, you can drive out to Princess Bay, park your car by the beach, walk across the road and climb one of the tracks up onto the peninsular. Land that was, not long ago, only gorse and grass, with not a tree growing there: home only to rats and sparrows.

Now it is green and growing, full of life with the song of Tui and riroriro.

We also have kerb-side recycling these days, which Kae's legacy may have kick-started, though support for mental health sufferers still has a long way to come and many people think our country can do more for refugees.

Kae Miller left a tangible blessing for future generations. She transformed a corner of Wellington and inspired improvements in other areas, a legacy that was undergirded by the story of the Transfiguration and a hope for the transfiguration of all things.

A hope that when life flourishes, then the world is being transfigured. Then we are seeing a foretaste of the redemption of all things.

So...

Tending our garden, planting native trees, recycling milk bottles, re-using rather than throwing away, opening our homes, extending a hand of compassion, meeting people in their distress... These are signs of the coming Kingdom of God.

I think that Kae's is a life and a story for us all to remember, for us all to reflect on as people who seek to follow Jesus, who seek to walk in the Light of our transfigured Christ.

But... we started this sermon with war, and we end with war.

The story of the Transfiguration contains a cloud, the mysterious, unknowing cloud of the presence of God. But there is another cloud that hangs over Transfiguration Day. It was also on this day, Aug 6th 1945, when America dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima.

Aug 6th, the feast of the transfiguration, and now also Peace Sunday.

- A day to remember the Light of God shining out of Jesus, a Light that inhabits all things, a Light that will one day break forth with the renewal of Creation at the end of this age.

- But also a day to remember Hiroshima. A demonstration of the human capacity for destruction, our ability to unmake Creation, our barely held in check propensity to render that which is green and growing back to dust.

So, Transfiguration Sunday and Kae Miller.

May the Light of Christ indeed shine among us and from within us, this day and always... illuminating a different way forward, saving us from ourselves, saving Creation from our capacity for violence and evil.

Until this age comes to an end and the Divine Light breaks forth, purging away all darkness and sin, restoring all things, making all things new and clean and holy.

May we leave this place yearning, praying and acting for the transfiguration of all things – in this age and in the age to come.

Amen!