

A friend transfigured

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Transfiguration A. Mt 17 1-9

I want to tell you a story about a special friend who I saw transfigured at a time when he was desperately ill; a Luritja Man from the remote community of Papunya in the Northern Territory, true Dad to our Shekayla.

He was transferred down here to hospital, and after many weeks, he was still in an intensive care bed; his condition still critical. For over a month, they'd been trying to get him back on his feet. Throughout that time, we'd been on the phone with the family back in Papunya trying to keep them up with what was happening for him – he was such a long way from home. There were times when he'd say how he was worried – lonely. I saw him often. Yet how could you help him enough with so much worry, such a distance from country and family; such profound loneliness?

But on one particular day, I got there and something had changed. All the busyness around him was still going on, but about him there was a stillness; a peace. In his eyes, there was all of a sudden something like a great depth or maybe it was a vast distance; a kind of timelessness. We talked normally, joked. But he looked different. There was an ancient dignity. He was oblivious to the busy intrusion of intensive-care medicine. He was looking at something I couldn't see – he could see way further than I could. I think of that time when I hear today's gospel story. I think I have some idea of what Peter, James and John saw – a friend transfigured; someone I knew and loved suddenly become so much more than I'd ever imagined.

I didn't have any idea what he could see now with his great, deep eyes. After he died, his other friends and I would piece

together our conversations with him, and each of us added new dots to a picture which grew steadily in clarity; a pattern coming into view. It's a picture of someone accepting that his death was coming. His pastor in Papunya spoke with him daily on the phone. They didn't name it to each other, but the day after he died, his pastor wrote to me, *'Looking back, I think he sensed he was dying.'*

He must have. I watched as gently, he set about putting relationships in order. In his last week here, he was on the phone with his family for most of each day; absolutely there with them as far as he could be – adjudicating disputes, giving counsel, telling people how we belong to each other.

And when Shekayla came back to Adelaide for school, in the last two days he was here, when they were together, her Dad's priority was to focus her on her school life, and on her relationship with us as her family here in Adelaide.

The whole time he was here, he had his Bible with him. From time to time, he'd ask me to get him some different strength reading glasses, so he could keep up with his daily Bible study. Every time we spoke, in person or on the phone, he'd make sure we prayed together.

At some moment, he'd changed. He'd entered a place of stillness; of peace. His vision deepened with a distance, with a timelessness, with an ancient dignity – he'd gone somewhere I couldn't see; I had a glimpse of someone I'd never even vaguely known. He was transfigured. And his transfiguration keeps coming into view – now that he's gone. It was coming into view up in Papunya at the sorry camp and the funeral, in our prayers and our sadness down here, and in our deepening bond with his family. We're still discovering his transfiguration.

That's something like what we saw begin on the mountain in today's Gospel; it begins for Peter, James and John. Jesus is

transfigured before them. But he knows they won't begin to comprehend it until after Easter – until its full meaning can begin to be gathered. How could they understand that they've kept company with the God of all time and space? His transfiguration frightened them so badly they collapsed in dread? How do you make sense of such a vision? But then he touches them so normally; tells them *get up; don't be afraid*. The whole majesty of God, and then a gentle touch of encouragement; can we grasp that?

Have you ever seen anyone transfigured? Did they do something, or say something, or did anyone tell you something about them which utterly transformed the way you know them? Often it's close to their death, or after it – stories at their funeral that we'd never imagined; their transfiguration changes us – sets us on a new path that they could see, and we're only now discovering it. Some of these moments we call mountain-top experiences; like the ones in the Bible. They bring us clarity and vision that we seldom find apart from the closeness of death. My hopes and prayers for a medical miracle blurred my vision of my friend's epiphany and transfiguration – they hindered me from entering into it with him. But God is patient.

Matthew gets that across to us today. It's amazing how we people can be so blind – how we try to domesticate something transcendent. Jesus is dazzlingly transfigured on a mountaintop there with his close friends. Moses and Elijah appear with him, and Peter says *I'll pitch three tents for you*. Let's contain this in something we can comprehend. Matthew shows us how bizarre our reaction to the transcendent can be. But then he can afford to be knowledgeable; he's writing this after Easter.

The season of Epiphany opens with the light of the star of Bethlehem, and it closes with the light of the Transfiguration. It's the time of the light of God's presence – God revealed among us, vulnerable and gentle, touching us

and saying, *'get up; don't be afraid'*. It's the light by which, if we truly look, we can see people being gently transformed into God's likeness.

I've been learning that I'm in God's presence when people are open to God. I mightn't necessarily notice until it seems too late. But God makes sure it's never a too-late time. I've watched Christ transfigure limitations – even death – into a vision of God's Love. I've seen a man in Christ's image accept his death and gently prepare his family and friends for what they would face.

The light of the world calls us to transfigure lives and set the captive free: hallowed be his name! Amen