

## SECURITY IN THE PRESENCE OF DANGER<sup>1</sup>

**A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the Feast of the Transfiguration and the Baptism of Phebe and Pyper Cupples, 23 February 2020**

It's always a privilege to preach at a baptism. Today, I have that privilege at the baptism of Phebe and Pyper.

During the Second World War a German Lutheran minister and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was part of the underground resistance to the Nazi regime. He was arrested, put in prison and ultimately was executed. While in gaol, he wrote to his fiancée, Maria von Wedemeyer, saying that marriage represented "a token of confidence in the future".<sup>2</sup> They were brave words, considering that they had no future together; they would never get married. I think that his words apply also to baptism. In the 1960s, people discussed whether or not it was proper to bring children into a world threatened with the atom bomb that might kill us all. Today, the reason for not having children might be climate change. If the older persons are not worried by climate change, our young people certainly are. In baptism, people are admitted into the church. Not only are we asking for the Holy Spirit to descend on Phebe and Pyper, we are implicitly saying that there is a future for them.

In a sermon,<sup>3</sup> written from his prison cell for the wedding of his nephew and read there on his behalf, Bonhoeffer pointed out that a couple's love for each other is private, but that their marriage is public. So, it is with children. Their conception and birth are private, but their life is public. New babies must be registered and become public persons, citizens. The parents are required to educate them and to care for them. If these things do not happen, society will intervene. So, not only should we believe that our children have a future, we are required to ensure it.

Today we are celebrating the Transfiguration, the story we have just heard read from the centre of the church. So, what will we make of the Transfiguration in relation to today's baptisms? The opening verse of our epistle reading from 2 Peter says, "For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ ..."<sup>4</sup> By this remark, the author seeks to ground the Christian faith in real events, not myths, which he regards as falsehoods.

The author was pointing out that Christianity is a profoundly materialist faith. By this I mean that Christianity is firmly grounded in the material world. It originates in the actions of God in the world; creation, incarnation, resurrection and continuing presence.

Such a conclusion might seem to create problems for us when we consider the Transfiguration. It might seem to be a most other-worldly event. I suspect that many of us, including me, have great difficulty in imagining what the Transfiguration was like. The appearance of persons from the past, Moses and Elijah, gives the impression of unreality. It is, in fact, a story that

---

<sup>1</sup> Readings: Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18; Psalm 119:33-40; 1 Corinthians 3:10-17; Matthew 5:38-48

<sup>2</sup> <http://goingtodamasc.us/a-very-bonhoeffer-valentines-day/>

<sup>3</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, New York, Macmillan, 1967, p. 31

<sup>4</sup> <http://lutheranweddings.blogspot.com.au/2007/10/wedding-sermon-by-dietrich-bonhoeffer.html>

<sup>4</sup> 2 Peter 1:16

might be part of an animated film, where all sorts of strange things can happen; or part of a Harry Potter movie where digital images can create anything that we can imagine.

The gospels all place this story in exactly the same location, following Peter's declaration that Jesus is the Messiah and Jesus telling his disciples of his forthcoming suffering. This is perhaps why we celebrate the Transfiguration today, just before Lent, which begins on Wednesday and when we prepare ourselves for Good Friday and Easter. What is clear is that this event is a major critical moment in the life of Jesus and his disciples. Something real happened here.

If we know what happened before the event, "on the way down from the mountain, Jesus tells the disciples who came with him not to tell anyone until the "Son of Man" is raised from the dead".<sup>5</sup> Jesus is reminding his disciples, and us, that violence is going to continue on in the lives of the apostles and on into our lives as well.

Not only is this event frightening in its description of a vision, it contains hints of what is to come. It is little wonder that Peter thought it a good idea to stay on the mountain top. In our Christian lives we are often torn between the high points of religious experience, our so-called mountain top experiences, and the apparent perils of our daily activities. The Transfiguration might seem to encourage this tension. But, if we look more closely, we can see that it undermines it. The contrast is an illusion; the Transfiguration appeared to offer safety but actually offered no safety at all.

On 18 March 1958, Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk now renowned for his spiritual leadership, was doing some errands for his community in the nearby town of Louisville, Kentucky. Trappists are noted for their seclusion and contemplative practices. But Merton, while standing at a street corner, realised that he could not cut himself off from the world. One commentator says that this realisation

... points to Merton's movement from being a kind of enclosed monk in the monastery, turning his back on the world, to beginning to turn toward the world. He was cutting himself off from the world, but gradually he realizes you can't do that. That he's in the monastery for the world.<sup>6</sup>

You see, our lives are all of a piece. There is no safe secluded place in contrast to the dangerous world. There is just one place where we experience both safety and danger at the same time. This is the world into which Phebe and Pyper have been born and will live. Today we welcome them into the church and assure them that, whatever happens, they have a secure home here.

This poem by Justin Farley may express what I mean.

### **FOLLOW ME**

You say follow me,  
but I'm not sure where you're going.  
You say follow me,  
as if you're leading me out  
of the chaos and confusion,  
but the closer I follow,  
the thicker the clouds of darkness seem to be  
and the less comfortable my life gets.

---

<sup>5</sup> <https://andrewmarrosb.blog/2014/03/01/the-transfigured-glory-of-gods-children/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://wfpl.org/exploring-thomas-merton-epiphany-marker-louisville/>

You say follow me,  
but insist I leave “me” behind.  
You say follow me,  
but wait just a minute.  
Let me look you over,  
examine you and ask, “just who are you?”  
You say follow me,  
and my heart knows it’s what I was born to do.  
You say follow me,  
but my head has different plans.  
It sees the storm clouds you’re brewing  
and the confrontation that arises  
wherever you go.  
My mind makes up excuses,  
finds ways to dismiss you and remain in the lead.  
But you say follow me,  
and I see the goodness and living water that flows  
from the river you’re providing.  
I see the beauty of your face  
and if what you say is true –  
it’s the greatest story the world will ever know.  
But you say follow me  
and it scares me because there’s still some doubt.  
But does that doubt have anything to do with you  
or because I know accepting you comes at a cost,  
knowing that I’ll have to die to myself  
and admit I’m lost?  
You say follow me.  
Grant that I may be willing to take up my cross.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Justin Farley, “Follow me”, <https://alongthebarrenroad.com/2015/01/06/follow-me-christian-poem/>