

+ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The festival of the Transfiguration of our Lord Jesus on the mountain will always be a special day for me because it marks the anniversary of my ordination to the priesthood. I will never forget that day. It was sunny and bright without being too hot. The laying on of hands was done by Bishop Gary Wetherill, who was then the Bishop of the Willochra Diocese. Archbishop Ian George had ordained me deacon, but he retired, and it was the interim before Archbishop Jeffrey Driver arrived. And so it was a different time in the Diocese of Adelaide. It was a time of waiting and uncertainty, the shadow of child abuse just beginning to destabilise what seemed previously to be the impervious structure of the church.

Sixteen years have passed since that day, the day when the sun shone through the beautiful stained glass windows of St Peter's Cathedral upon the newly ordained priests, our smiles radiating in our transfigured forms. The diocese has another archbishop, and the structure of the church is even more unstable than it was back then. The aftermath of the ordeal of facing institutional child abuse has left an indelible scar on the church. We scramble to make things right again, constantly updating the accreditation requirements for people who work in the church, always on the back foot, driving forward nonetheless, staying faithful even when the demands seem to overcome our capacities.

The church in most forms in Australia is in what is known as a liminal space. A liminal space means being at a threshold, neither in the old familiar place nor the next. We cannot see clearly where we are going. It is like being in a doorway and not knowing what is on the other side. The liminal space is a place of unknowing. The old structures are not working anymore. The past is slipping away, even though we are reluctant to let it go. "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold," the poet W. B. Yeats famously said in his poem 'Second Coming' in 1919, just over a century ago. The apocalyptic appeal of these words suits the situation of the

church in the present time almost as much as it appeals to the situation of the world and human society in the middle of a pandemic.

The threshold is a dangerous and frightening space to occupy. What will happen next? Nothing is certain anymore. When we don't know where we are going, and the usual dependable things slip from our grasp then we scramble for something to hold onto. The church is not the same as it was twenty years ago, and it is not going to be like it again. I think most of us can see the patterns of change in society linked to church attendance because we see it among our own families and friends. We do not really need the National Church Life Survey to affirm the things we know within our own communities. The link to the church that was socially solid and kept people coming back is breaking down. These patterns of change have created the liminal space we now occupy.

At the same time the wider human society beyond the church has entered a liminal season. The old patterns of behaviour have transformed, and people are trying to work out what they will become next. Sharing and human touch between strangers is less common now. Just look at how different our church worship is today from a year ago, just before everything changed. It seems like an eternity ago that we shook hands at the greeting of peace and shared the common cup, kneeling around the altar. The term 'the new normal' is a code for the corporate efforts to establish familiarity between people on new terms.

In the liminal space new things emerge. The new things happen amidst the turmoil and anxieties of crumbling substructures and hierarchies of power. The old battlegrounds of politics need a new space to wage war. Different leaders are standing up. Suddenly state premiers seem to hold more authority than the federal government. As state borders open and close like revolving doors the ordinary people witness their own powerlessness to return to how it was before. The ease of travel and assumption we can see interstate family and friends whenever we like has slipped from our grasp. The confusion of constantly

changing rules leaves us afraid and stressed. The economic and emotional fatigue of repeated lockdowns wears away the resilience of the people – as Yeats says, “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.”

Both in wider society and in the church, we cannot see beyond the threshold. We are getting glimpses of what it will be like, but the vision is not yet clear. There are signs of new life. It is the certainty of death that life will emerge. It is the Easter assurance from Good Friday to the dawn of the third day. God the Father has invested heavily in the church with the deposit of the life of the Son. The church will survive the liminal season, break through the threshold into the other side, into the shining light. We will all be changed. We will be changed in the church and we will be changed in the post-COVID world beyond the church, and we do not know what it will look like yet.

Today we are celebrating the Transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain. The mountain was high. It was a threshold moment for Jesus and for the disciples who accompanied him, Peter, James and John. There in the dazzling light of the transfigured Jesus they looked for what was familiar, and so they saw Elijah and Moses the great leaders of the people of Israel talking to Jesus. But it was their friend Jesus who was emerging into something new, making them transit through the liminal threshold into the reflection of Easter light. With Jesus it would not be like it was with Elijah and Moses. The old order had passed away and a new leader was taking them forward.

God’s affirmation of Jesus in the overshadowing cloud on the mountain was last heard at his baptism as he broke through the water. Imagine what that voice sounded like – the voice of God. No wonder the disciples were terrified in the transfiguring of Jesus. We are usually afraid when the old and the familiar give way into the new and unknown. When the disciples came down from the mountain, they came down having shared an experience which signalled the end of a past way of life and the beginning of a new way. Jesus might have told them

not to tell anyone what they saw, but the others were sure to know by their new behaviour that something life-changing had happened on the mountain. Beyond the rising of the Son of Man from the dead the work of the disciples would begin. The stories would be told, and nothing held back. Yes, the Lord was transfigured in shining white light and the old order passed onto the new.

On the mountain of transfiguration, the three disciples and Jesus were in the liminal threshold and it was not until Easter morning that they broke through to the other side. The rolled away stone was the doorway and Jesus showed them the way through. Sometimes we must stay in the liminal space for some time. It may be a short time, but it may be years that we live not knowing what we will become. For the disciples it was likely months between the transfiguring mountain experience and the events of Easter. In the space in between they would not have know where they were going other than Jesus was showing them the way. Jesus still shows the way. He is with us today in our liminal season as individuals and groups, businesses and communities in the middle of a pandemic, uncertain and anxious, unable to see clearly the way forward. He is with is in the church as we wait and pray for something new to emerge, as we hang onto what is familiar and strive to see when we don't know where we are going.

Let us pray. Holy God, you spoke to the disciples on the mount of transfiguration, affirming your Son as beloved, making us listen to him. Inspire us again to listen to your Son, to hear what he is saying as we strive to see clearly in these uncertain times. Bless the church that is your Son's body. Make us glad of our calling and help us to be your disciples today in the threshold of unknowing and tomorrow in the dawn of Easter light. Amen.