



TRANSFORMED in the STRUGGLE

KATHLEEN RUSHTON'S reading of Luke 9:28-36 highlights the commitment that Jesus, and all disciples, give to understanding God's mission in the world.

Mark and Matthew tell us Jesus “was transfigured before them”. Luke describes this event differently – Jesus prays, his conversation with Moses and Elijah is revealed and the disciples “were heavy with sleep” (Lk 9:28-33). I will explore the possibility that the disciples are being offered both an example of Jesus praying at a time of difficulty and insights into his intimate relationship with God.

This incident happened as the Galilean ministry of Jesus came to a climax around questions about his identity and the direction in which God's mission was taking him. Disciples had asked: “Who is this ...?” (Lk 8:25) after he calmed the storm. King Herod had asked: “Who is this ...?” (Lk 9:9). The focus moves to the disciples. A new phrase in their formation has begun. They are to learn what following Jesus and his mission really meant.

Context of Mission

Jesus called the twelve to commission them on God's mission to do what they had seen him doing – healing, exorcisms and preaching (Lk 9:1-2). He instructed them: “Take nothing for the way, neither staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money, nor have two tunics ...” (Lk 9:3). Scripture scholar Michael Trainor links this instruction

to a “disposition towards creation and a resistance to the temptation to power, status and privilege” with which Jesus was tempted by the devil at the beginning of his ministry. The twelve's focus is to be on God's mission. They are to take no bag of possessions, to rely on God's providence for bread, to carry only one tunic and to have no money to purchase Earth's goods or satisfy their needs.

The disciples return from mission and tell Jesus all about it. Then, taking them with him, Jesus “withdrew privately to a city called Bethsaida” (Lk 9:10). Crowds followed. Jesus welcomed them. Later, the disciples wanted Jesus to send the crowds away to get lodging and food. He challenged them to respond to the situation: “You give them something to eat.” With the hospitality of the superabundance of God, Jesus fed the crowds (Lk 9:12-17).

The Big Question

As often happens in Luke, significant developments begin with Jesus at prayer by himself “with only the disciples near him” (Lk 9:18). Then he asked the big question: “Who do the crowds say I am?” Then of the disciples: “But who do you say I am?” Peter's answer is spot on: “You are the Christ (the Anointed).” When Jesus talked for the first time about his coming suffering, death and resurrection, neither Peter, nor any disciples, disputed with him (contrast with Mk 8:32-33; Mat 16:22-23) when he explained that his being the Messiah would mean suffering. Suffering would be, also, the lot of the disciples (Luke 9:23-27). His followers are to deny themselves and “take up their cross *daily* and follow me”. “Daily” is Luke's addition. Jesus was talking about a spirituality for the long haul.

That events of Luke's account are found between this first (Lk 9:22) and the second mention of suffering, death

Kathleen Rushton RSM lives in Ōtautahi Christchurch where, in the sight of the Southern Alps and the hills, she continues to delight in learning and writing about Scripture.



RL Lk 9:28-36 - 17 March 2nd Sunday of Lent
RCL Lk 9:28-36 (37-43a) - 5 March Transfiguration Sunday and 17 March 2nd Sunday of Lent (alternative)

and resurrection (Lk 9:44; third, 18:31-33) which seem to be designed to help the disciples with the difficult instruction Jesus gives them.

Jesus Prays

About eight days later, with “Peter, James and John, Jesus goes up the mountain to pray”. The mountain, a place rich in biblical symbolism, is where Jesus communicates with God. A pattern of Jesus’s intimacy with God in solitude on a mountain is developed: before he selected the twelve (Lk 6:12) and just before his passion and death (Lk 22:39-46). Jesus is presented as praying in Luke, more than in the other Gospels.

Now, the focus is on the experience of Jesus. He prayed about the problem of where God’s mission was taking him. His direction was set when in his hometown synagogue and in the tradition of the prophets, he proclaimed: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor ... sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour” (Lk 4:16-19).

In doubt and bewilderment, Jesus prayed. Things came together. His glory, which the disciples saw, was the radiant joy that came with resolution of a horrendously troubling situation. Now divine power transformed him completely. He saw things from a different perspective.

But opposition abounded. His townsfolk tried to “hurl (Jesus) off a cliff” (Lk 4:28-30). Demons rebuked him. Scribes and Pharisees questioned him, accused him of blasphemy, of breaking the sabbath and were “filled with fury and discussed ... what they might do to Jesus” (Lk 5:21; 6:11). We can use the language of Catholic Social Teaching to describe Jesus’s sermon of the plain as an “option for the poor”. Blessed are the poor, the hungry, those who weep, the reviled, excluded, defamed. Jesus declared, “Woe to you rich ... who are full ... happy now ... when people speak well of you” (Lk 6:20-26).

Why Suffering and Death?

From a historical point of view, Jesus suffered and died because he stayed faithful to his role in God’s mission with a courage that did not quit. He gave hope and good news to poor, marginalised people. This was dangerous to do in first century Palestine which was occupied and dominated by imperial Rome in collusion with local elites – Herod, scribes and religious leaders.

Was Jesus unaware of what was going on? Did he want to die? Of course not. He had a deep-seated commitment to his calling of who he was and what he was called to do. Yet Jesus was human. He struggled. He saw the writing on the wall. We can think of contemporary women and men who stayed faithful despite danger and the risk of death. For example, Dorothy Stang in the Amazon rainforest; Oscar Romeo and Jean Donovan in El Salvador; Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Nazi Germany; Martin Luther King in the United States of America; and Doctors without Borders in Syria.

My Chosen

In doubt and bewilderment, Jesus prayed. Things came together. His face lit up – “the appearance of his face changed”. His glory, which the disciples saw, was the radiant joy that came with resolution of a horrendously troubling situation. Divine power flowed through the person of Jesus in the mighty wonders of God’s mission. Now divine power transformed him completely. His clothing became “dazzling white”. He saw things from a different perspective.

Moses and Elijah talked with Jesus about his departure (*exodus*) which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem. He had to verify and work out the implications that his impending death, his *exodus*, could be a saving event which paralleled the Exodus and stressed the unity of God’s action in history. The glory of God’s presence, often named as the Shekinah, is depicted as a cloud (Exodus 13:21) and indicated the nearness or presence of the unseen God. The voice from the cloud recalled the voice from heaven at his baptism (Luke 3:22) which spoke directly to Jesus and was heard by him alone: “You are my Son, the Beloved.” Now, the disciples heard from the cloud which overshadowed them, a voice speaking in the third person: “This is my son, my Chosen; listen to him” (Lk 9:35). Earlier in the story, the twelve were *chosen* by Jesus (Lk 6:13).

As disciples we might reflect on our participation in God’s mission. What sustains us in tough times? How do we keep our commitment to mission fresh? How do we learn about new directions in God’s mission? ☪



Join our regular giving programme today

Make a lasting difference in the lives of those in need

Caritas
AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND
One World Partnership

www.caritas.org.nz
0800 22 10 22