

## Transfigured Night

Dehmel's poem *Transfigured night*, later set to the music we hear by Schoenberg, tells the story of two lovers walking together through a cold wood, when the woman reveals she is pregnant to another man. No reason is given, but at the time this poem was written such an event was always viewed as the woman's fault. In the culture of the day, a particular response is expected – she should be shunned, he should have nothing more to do with her, This should be the end of the relationship.

Unexpectedly, he does something different. He draws her close and reassures her. He promises to be the child's father saying:

“Do not let the child you have conceived  
be a burden on your soul.  
Look, how brightly the universe shines!  
Splendour falls on everything around,  
you are voyaging with me on a cold sea,  
but there is the glow of an inner warmth  
from you in me, from me in you.  
That warmth will transfigure the stranger's child,  
and you bear it me, begot by me.  
You have transfused me with splendour,  
you have made a child of me.”

The poem ends with their embrace and “Two people walk on through the high, bright night.”

## Transfiguration

Mark 9:2-9

The word “transfiguration” is one of those rather “churchy” words – we do not hear it outside of the context of church services and Bible readings, unless – as we have already seen – you are a classical music buff and know this particular work of Schoenberg. Even some of the modern translations avoid this word. The Message says “his appearance changed” while the Voice says “he was transformed.” Using the churchy language is not just off-putting to those outside our church circles. It can also obscure us from seeing what this is actually about.

I was thinking about this the other day while I was doing two other things. Firstly, I was grumping about the reflection that I had written for today that I was not particularly happy about. Secondly, I was finishing up decorating some bags to give to the YouthCare chaplains when we host their blessing on Monday week. I think it was this combination that led me to thinking differently about the transfiguration.

The word *transfiguration* comes from the Latin via Old French and Middle English and, according to the Oxford English Dictionary means *a complete change of form or appearance into a more beautiful or spiritual state*. This is clearly a change that is beyond the physical, so perhaps the closer modern word is “transformation.”

So what does the meaning of this word have to do with decorating bags? I started with a plain white bag **hold up bag** and with a bit of cutting and gluing of coloured paper, ended up with something like this. **Show the backpack**. It's a bit cute, isn't it. However, what makes it more than simply a bag is what goes in it.

You see, when I was starting to think about the blessing service for our chaplains, I thought about symbols of their ministry. **Take out the various symbols and explain**

them. Each of these symbols represents a tool that chaplains might use in their daily work, and it also represents that we are thinking and praying for the chaplains. By packaging them together like this each item becomes something more than simply the physical item. The spiritual meaning changes and they are all transformed from being a simple candle or pen to something that has real significance.

In Mark's story of the transfiguration, we see something of that change happening. Jesus had been preaching and teaching the disciples as well as the crowds. People had been healed and people were learning they are loved by God. What did Peter, James, and John think about who Jesus was before this significant moment? Perhaps they had seen him commanding the unclean spirits not to say who he was and so they had the inkling that he was more than simply a teacher and healer.

In this story we hear the repetition of the voice that spoke at Jesus' baptism: this is my beloved son. The story includes Moses and Elijah, who represent the Law and the Prophets. Jesus is depicted as the fulfilment of the Torah and the bringing of God's intervention into the lives of the people. How do we expect the disciples to respond?

Well, we know a little about how the disciples responded if we read around this passage. On either side of this story we hear Jesus saying that he will be killed by the authorities and the disciples denying this will happen. All they can see is the physical transformation without understanding the inner transformation that also occurs. They want this Messiah to meet their expectations of what a Messiah should be – a victorious one ridding the world of Romans – not a Messiah who will suffer one of the worst deaths that can be inflicted on an individual.

And what of us and our community? How do we experience transformation and do we resist it like the disciples? What is it that holds you back from looking to that change?

I find it serendipitous that in our tradition Transfiguration Sunday is on the last Sunday of the Epiphany season. It is one of the most significant points of self-revelation of God in the life of Jesus, even if the disciples did not understand what it meant at the time. Do we just focus on the physical glory or as we look towards our Lenten journey do we also experience something of that inner transformation as a result?

As we finish this time of reflection, I asked Tim to play a short excerpt from Schoenberg's *Transfigured Night* – like the characters in the poem, like our Gospel story today, how are we called to be part of that transformation of our world?