

Sermon: Bishop Michael Pryse of the Eastern Synod

Mark 9: 2-9

The Holy Gospel according to Mark:

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. The Gospel of the Lord!

Hi everybody! It is a real delight to be here with you today and to be a part of your Sunday worship and to give your pastor this small bit of relief. Our rostered ministers have been doing a magnificent job of providing opportunities for us to worship over the course of this long pandemic. But friends, it is very hard work and anything we can do to help lighten the load they are carrying is well worth supporting!

Today I'd like to share a few thoughts with you concerning the subject of vision. And I'm sure that most of you would agree that vision is a very important thing. You know very well from your own experience, both individually and as a congregation, that you need vision to carry a task through to completion. You need vision to sustain you and refresh you as you press through the bumps, turns and valleys we will inevitably encounter in life.

There is, however, a potential danger involved in this vision business. Vision is good, but the line between being visionary and being delusional can

sometimes become very fine! Let me spell out the differences I see by way of an incident that happened to me some years ago on a golf course.

Now, for those of you who know not the pleasure of chasing a little bouncy ball over hundreds of acres of mixed terrain, let me tell you that all golfers carry a common vision. It is the vision of the perfect shot, a drive to the pin, a smooth effortless stroke and perfect backswing. You can imagine the gentle arc of the ball as it climbs into the sky. Perhaps a few astonished *oohs* and *aahs* from the gallery. And then lastly, you imagine the final, graceful drop of the ball, pin high and just a few feet from the cup.

Well, one day it actually happened for me. The vision became a reality. A perfect shot on a 265 yard par three followed by a gentle, dare I say casual, tap-in for birdie! It had never happened before nor since!

In retrospect, I now know that I should have accepted that vision, that unique experience, for what it truly was. I should have enjoyed this brief glimpse of golfing glory and then set it aside in my mind for future inspiration and guidance. But I didn't do that. Instead I immediately adopted the delusional posture of a naïve visionary.

I was no longer Michael, the intimate friend of sand trap and water hazard. I now stood among the great ones; a veritable Tiger Woods! And, of course, I encountered the end which ultimately comes to all naïve visionaries; and by the time I had finished the fourth hole I had lost seven balls; torn up enough divots to generously sod my front lawn and was seriously contemplating how much my clubs would fetch at our next neighbourhood garage sale!

My vision was left in tatters. Not because there was anything wrong with the vision itself, but rather because I had naïvely assumed to have claimed and contained that vision rather than allowing myself to be carried forward, guided and inspired by it.

Do you see the distinction? In our Gospel lesson we see elements of this dynamic played out in more sacred terms. Jesus and his disciples go up a mountain. Jesus moves on ahead and then, suddenly and unexpectedly, apparent magic starts to happen. Jesus form starts to change, he becomes like pure energy, pure light. Glorified beings seem to appear; Moses and

Elijah. And then finally the whole episode is dramatically concluded by a mysterious voice from the heavens that proclaims this same Jesus to be God's own Son.

Can you imagine having such an experience? And who can really know how or what was happening! Regardless, it was extraordinary and the response of the disciple's is understandable. They are both terrified by and captivated by this vision and want to hold onto it. They want this glorious moment to go on forever. They want to set up tents and live right there on the mountain!

But as quickly as the vision had come, it was gone. In an instant the disciples went from being privileged witnesses of the glories of heaven, back to being tired fisherman huddled on the unfamiliar face of a mountainside! The vision had come, and in spite of the disciples' desire to contain it and hold onto it, it had just as quickly passed. They confused this temporary and transitory vision for that which was eternal. They had confused the means with the end!

This is a danger which we, as a church, also need to continually guard against. We too can become misdirected and confused about the means and the end in ways that can distract us from our primary mission. Let me give you a secular example of what I mean.

In 1960 a Harvard business professor named Theodore Levitt wrote a classic article that focussed on the dramatic decline of the railroad industry in early 20th century North America. The decline of the industry, Levitt concludes, didn't come about because people and freight no longer needed to be transported. The railroad declined, rather, because the railway managers came to believe that they were in the railroad business rather than the transportation business. They confused the means - tracks and engines - with the ends - the transportation of people and freight!

Can you see any analogies for the church? Do we not sometimes function as if we were in the church business instead of the blessing business; the "we exist for ourselves" business as opposed to the "God's mission to bless the world" business?" Do we not sometimes fall into this same trap of confusing the means with the ends and making it all about us; acting as if the church – our buildings, institutions, practices and beliefs were an end in

and of themselves, rather than being a means by which we can support and participate in the ultimate end of advancing God's mission to bless and save the world.

I believe that there are many people in our communities who are open to experiencing the kind of conversions that many people experienced through Jesus' life and ministry, many people who are coming to recognize the emptiness and hollowness of the false gospels of contemporary life. But those questioners and seekers won't look for a renewed life in a community, in a church, that doesn't provide evidence of having experienced a similar conversion; that doesn't believably express the new life that we claim to be calling others to embrace. They won't easily be drawn to the life of a church which appears to be more interested in the church business than in the blessing business.

One of the unexpected, albeit forced, blessings of this time of pandemic has been a reordering of priorities; a renewed appreciation of the means and the ends. During this time where we have been cut off from our church buildings and from the activities and practices that received so much of our attention and care in a pre-pandemic time, we've been given the opportunity to focus on the real end and purpose of everything that we do; advancing the reign of God through faithful proclamation, prayer and service. It's been a kind of forced re-set that we really need to hang onto when the day eventually comes when we can return to some measure of normalcy in our life together.

The same voice that proclaimed Jesus to be "well loved" on the mount of transfiguration speaks that same blessing to us, today. That blessing is a means, and not an end. It is a means by which we are called to aid and abet the ultimate end of God's mission to bless and save the world; a means by which we are empowered to share the Gospel of love and reconciliation that has been entrusted to us; generously, freely and extravagantly for the world's salvation. AMEN