

Sermon: 'Our extreme potentials'

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Methodist Central Hall, Westminster

Sunday 8th August 2010 6.30 pm

LESSON: Genesis 11:11-9 & Luke 9:28-36

The 13 year old boy was used to coming home with a poor school report at the end of term and he knew that the best thing was to simply listen whilst his father carried out his usual "end of term" rant! He stood quietly, with his head hung low. When the old man had finished he looked up at his father and said: "Dad, what is the matter with me? Is it hereditary or is it environment?"

Reports on children often indicate something of their potential.

About a bright child, the school teacher may write: "with continued good education and application this child could go far".

About a wild lad who has gone off the rails, the probation officer may say: "this lad has the potential to cause enormous trouble. He will probably go far" – adding under his breath: "and the sooner the better!"

This evening I want us to think about potential at a rather more serious level.

Last Friday was the 6th August. It's a date that has a special place on the calendar for two very contrasting reasons.

First of all, it is the anniversary of the bombing of the Japanese city of Hiroshima, towards the end of the 2nd World War.

Secondly, it is the date that has been marked – since 1456 by many parts of the Christian Church as "The Feast of the Transfiguration".

Coming on the same day and standing in marked contrast to one another those two events point out to us the very worst and the very best possibilities for the human race.

The bombing of Hiroshima took place at the end of a world war that had lasted almost 6 years and engulfed many nations. The war in Europe had already come to an end with the German surrender in May. The war in the Pacific carried on, and when Japan ignored an ultimatum given (POTSDAM)... the American president, Harry Truman, gave an executive order for a nuclear weapon to be dropped. And so, on 6th August, a nuclear weapon called "little boy" was dropped on Hiroshima. Three days later, another nuclear bomb ("fat man") was dropped over Nagasaki.

The immediate results were catastrophic. Somewhere between 90,000 and 160,000 died in Hiroshima, and between 60,000 and 80,000 died in Nagasaki. Many died within the first two days from flash burns or flame burns or falling debris. Within the next few months many died from radiation sickness.

There were also long-term effects. Between the years 1950 and 1990 many cancer deaths were linked to radiation caused by the bombs.

The war swiftly came to an end. Six days after Nagasaki, the Japanese surrendered and by the beginning of September the Second World War had completely ended. But, in the process of bringing the war to an end, our ability and capacity – as a human race – for self destruction had been well demonstrated. And it formed the evidence for one of Winston Churchill's speeches when he said: "We have it in our ability to make this the best generation – or the last!"

The other story commemorated on 6th August is the story from the gospels that took place on a mountain side when Jesus took Peter, James and John with him. Whilst they were there two men appeared with him, Moses and Elijah, and they spoke with Jesus and Jesus was transfigured. "The appearance of his face changed and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning".

In Luke's account of this story we are given a little insight as to why Jesus had gone up the mountain. He had gone to pray. (Luke 9:28) And we are given a little insight as to the content of the conversation. "Moses and Elijah spoke with him about his departure which he was about to bring to fulfilment at Jerusalem". This was a vital part in the story of Jesus fulfilling His destiny and demonstrating His potential!

He had come to reveal the glory of God,
He had come to show the extent of God's love,
He had come to do battle with the powers of evil.

And He was going to bring to fulfilment all that had been spoken about in the Law – given by Moses – and by the prophets – represented here by Elijah.

Very soon after this, we are told that Jesus "set His face steadfastly to go to Jerusalem" – to fulfil His destiny, something from which He never turned back.

But this story of the transfiguration is more than a story just about Jesus. It is a story also about what can happen to those who follow Jesus and live close to Him. Even for those three disciples, Peter, James and John, who didn't quite understand all that was happening at the time, life was never quite the same again. This was one of the important markers of their discipleship. And when – some time later – Jesus went to the Garden of Gethsemane for His final struggle of prayer it was those three disciples who went with Him. They were invited into that "inner sanctum" moment when Jesus began His final struggle to ensure that He completed God's will.

Transfiguration – reflecting God's brightness and glory, being prepared and equipped to do God's will – is an experience that any follower of Jesus can have.

When we come to read the story of the Early Church we quickly meet up with Stephen. Stephen was one of the small group of people chosen to head up some of the practical and serving work of the church and so enable the apostles to concentrate on preaching and teaching. Stephen was chosen because he was "a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 6:5). As we know he became the first Christian martyr. When he appeared before the Sanhedrin to answer false charges against him

members of the Jewish ruling council found themselves looking intently at Stephen "and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel".

This was a transfiguration experience for Stephen. And it was not just skin deep – it wasn't simply that *his appearance* was like that of an angel. It was this inner transfiguration that enabled him to speak boldly and eloquently about Jesus. It was this inner transfiguration that enabled him to face stoning and death for his faith in Jesus. And it was this inner transfiguration that enabled him to fall on his knees – before he died – and speak like Jesus "Lord, do not hold this sin against them".

Writing in his book: "The Way of the Lord", a book about pilgrimage, Bishop Tom Wright says that there is a tradition which is very much more alive in Eastern orthodox churches than in Western Christianity that discovers a whole variety of ways in which human beings can be caught up in a quite literal blaze of glory. And this hasn't been just a matter of an outward reflecting of physical brightness but possessing deep within the mind and heart of Jesus that has enabled men and women to face difficult situations, persecutions, suppression of Christianity and the onslaught of Communism. (The Way of the Lord – Tom Wright. Chapter – The Way up the Mountain)

So, on the same day of the year, we have our attention drawn to two stories that could not have a greater contrast: The story of Hiroshima and the story of the Transfiguration.

What do these stories say to us? They both speak about possibilities, but very different possibilities. They are stories about our potential.

The first story speaks of warning, our potential for destruction.

The events of Hiroshima and Nagasaki – made possible by the splitting of the atom some years before – warn us about the potential for destroying the human race in this nuclear age. And we need to be realistic enough to know that we have this potential for self destruction. The potential for self destruction has always been there – it's just that in an age of nuclear warfare and global technology, the consequences become more and more dire.

But this possibility of destruction is not just destruction of the world and mass deaths. Our Old Testament reading comes from that collection of stories that endeavour to explain not so much *how things happened but why things are as they are*. The story of the Tower of Babel tells us something of our capacity to create chaos, disaster and destruction....simply by putting ourselves at the centre of everything and asserting our independence.

You may say:

"Well, I don't personally have the capacity to destroy the world. My finger is not on the nuclear button".

But whilst, as individuals, we may not have the capacity to destroy the world,

we *do* have the capacity for causing chaos and destruction.

When we assert our independence and self will, we can bring havoc in our family life.

When we assert our independence and self will, we can bring disruption and chaos to our work place.

When we assert our independence and self will, we can bring chaos and destruction to any community we happen to be part of.

And – starting in the world of personal relationships – we all have the capacity and potential to destroy another human being when we assert our independence and self will and open our mouths to utter careless words.

It's a word of serious warning to each one of us!

The second story speaks of a very different kind of potential, the hope of getting caught up in the very life of God Himself.

One of the famous sayings of St. Augustine's is worth having etched on our memories: "He became like us so that we might become like Him".

That was why Jesus came to earth – so that we might glimpse something of God and have the opportunity to get caught up with His life and become like Him.

Charles Wesley expressed it in a hymn we often sing at Christmas:

"Let earth and heaven combine". Speaking of Jesus and the Incarnation, he says:

"He deigns in flesh to appear,
Widest extremes to join;
To bring our vileness near,
And make us all divine:
And we the life of God shall know,
For God is manifest below"

In those two events, the story of Hiroshima and the story of the Transfiguration, we see the extremes of human potential.

On the one hand, the potential for destruction, self destruction and the destruction of one another. On the other hand, the potential for becoming like Jesus Christ – not just the outward appearance of divine glow BUT the inner will and strength to live in God's way and to do God's will and to be ready for anything that life may throw at us. And if we want to reach that potential for becoming like Jesus Christ, just not outwardly but inwardly we need to spend time with Him:-

We can do this in various ways, but let me briefly mention just three.

-Firstly, we can do that as we spend time reading the bible and absorbing His mind. Any of you who have had the experience of reading bedtime stories to young children will know how most children quickly acquire their favourite stories. They want to hear the same story time and again. They know what's coming next – and woe betide you if you are in a hurry and try to leave a page out. And if you stop – whilst you are reading one of the dialogues – they will tell you the next few words. The story has become part of them and they have become part of the story, and sometimes they even take on the nature of the characters. It's like that with the Jesus story. The more we read and absorb it, the more we know and remember automatically – and then we find ourselves *living* the story.

- Secondly, we can do that as we spent time praying. And remembering that our prayer is not only talking to God but being in His presence.

The story is told of a French pastor who was curious because one of the local farmers used to come and visit his church every day about noon and just sit in the church for a while. One day the pastor asked the farmer what he was doing. And the farmer replied. "I come in here to look at Jesus and I just sit. I look at Him, and He looks at me!"

-Thirdly, we can do that as we come to the communion table. John Pritchard, Bishop of Oxford, in his new book about Jesus quotes the philosopher, Feuerbach, who said: "Man is what he eats". What Feuerbach meant was: "and that's all a person is". But, as John Pritchard points out: "He couldn't have made a more Christian and sacramental statement; we are indeed what we eat. And so as we feed spiritually on Christ in Communion we become like Him". (p.75 "Living Jesus" SPCK).

This process of reaching our potential by becoming like Christ, our transfiguration, is a life-long process.

As a young minister, in my first appointment, I discovered I had many elderly and housebound people in the congregations of my three churches. Amongst them was a tiny woman, in her mid-80's, who lived in one of the villages. I went to take her communion each month. She was frail and riddled with arthritis, always in pain, and found it difficult to get comfortable either in a chair or in bed. But she was an inspiration to visit. She never spent time complaining about herself. She was always concerned to enquire about other people. She wanted to know how I was getting on. She had lived a life of faith, close to Jesus, and it showed in her face and in her attitude. She knew she would never be free from this arthritic pain but this didn't destroy her serenity and peace. And she faced present pain with bravery and she faced the future with confidence. The words that linger in my mind, whenever I think of Miss Drage are these: "I'm not afraid to die" she would say, "and if you have to take my funeral, make sure it is a joyful one!" She was still alive when I left that appointment and the privilege of taking her funeral fell to one of my successors. But she had spent time with Jesus – and she had become like him. She preached more eloquently to me by her life than I have ever been able to do with my words.

"We, who with unveiled faces, all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord" (II Cor 3:18)
That's the potential for which we all need to long and pray.