

**SERMON AT BRUNSWICK: 10/2/2002: GEOFF CHADWICK: THE
TRANSFIGURATION: MTT 17:1-7:
“HEAVENLY AND EARLTHY GODS”**

In the year 2000, the Anglican Province of Western Australia held its first conference since 1975. Entitles “Imagine Us” its thrust was to get the participants to imagine what the church might be like in the year 2020. It was called 20/20 vision.

The opening ceremony to this conference, held in the Octagon Theatre of the University of WA was a spectacularly simple affair. Apart from some obvious “churchy” bits, the ceremony included a dance of welcome and inspiration performed by the Aboriginal community. This dance, accompanied by the traditional rhythms of didgeridoo and rhythm stick, portrayed the creation and original blessing of humanity by the Dreamtime spirits. There was much stomping of the ground, stirring up of dust and rolling around in the earth.

It wasn’t until after the event that I began to realise the contrast between Aboriginal spiritual expression and our Western – Greek philosophically influenced spiritual expression. The contrast was simply this:

For us (Western Christians) God is up in the heavens. For the Aboriginal people God is to be found in the earth.

Today’s Gospel reading highlights the western “God in the Heavens” approach to things:

... Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves... And he was transfigured before them... Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah... suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” (Mtt 17:1ff, NRSV).

Note all the “heavenly” images of God: Mountain tops, clouds, voices from on high...” Such imagery serves our Western minds well. For us “thinking on things heavenly” and “contemplating God” are almost synonymous (equivalent) terms. We warm to the story. We understand the images of “higher things”. We know God to be “up there”.

Nevertheless, I invite you to turn your mind upside down for a moment. What if we could imagine God to be found in the dust of the earth? What if we were able to find God in a similar way to our Aboriginal friends – to look not up – but down? To find God not just in our lofty ideas but beneath our feet? What if we were to stomp around in the dirt, raise the dust and call *up* our God... I wonder what sort of God we might find. It’s worth contemplating. A God who is beneath us – a God whose nature is like the nurture of good soil. A God who is like us – ie of the earth – who just like the soil can be “blown away” or “eroded” by our neglect or wilfulness. An earth God who’s not “up there” in some distant heaven, but is here with us – dust with our dust...

Paul Tillich, an influential philosopher and theologian of the 20th century, once define God as the “ground of being.” For him, this was a way of saying that God undergirds the whole of existence. God is the foundation of everything including the meaning of our lives. God is the “ground of being”. Perhaps Tillich had a similar insight to that of our Aboriginal friends. To define God as “ground” was to put God within our reach. Somehow God and earth and being human come together in the dust of the earth.

Now before this all seems a bit strange I note that “heavenly” thinking is challenged in the Gospel reading. Whilst on the mountain – whilst in the presence of God Peter’s desire to preserve the experience for all time is challenged. Jesus takes

them all down the mountain. They return to the plain – to the work of ministry and to the work of crucifixion. Things of dust and earth are to be of importance. Even after transfiguration real life must demand their attention.

And so it is with us. We may find God in the “heavens”. We may find God in lofty thoughts or high ideals. But ultimately we must come down to the dust of the plain. We must be with the people of the earth, working through the dust in their lives to reveal a very real God – a God who is as close as the earth is beneath their feet - a God where “Earth to earth”; “ashes to ashes”; and “dust to dust” are not merely words from our burial liturgy but words of ultimate reality. Let us stomp around in the dust of our lives and find God. After all Jesus stomped around in the dust with us!

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.