

Sermon Notes from the Requiem for the Reverend Dr. Bill Crockett, 1934-2018  
Christ Church Cathedral, Vancouver BC  
November 24, 2018

*“And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white.” (Luke 9: 29)*

The story of the transfiguration of Jesus held a particular fascination for Bill Crockett. In his study, amidst his many books there was an Icon depicting this moment in the New Testament where the disciples witness amazing change in Jesus physical appearance. Luke’s gospel reports that Jesus face changes—it does not say exactly how—and his clothes became dazzling white. Not only that, Peter, James and John see two of the ancient prophets standing right beside Jesus, talking too him. “Whoa” exclaims Peter, well, maybe not ‘whoa’ but I’m sure something like that! Maybe he said, “This is so cool” like the kids do today—he went on to propose building some kind of monument, or statues or something to freeze that moment in time because it was, well, literally awesome. And then if that wasn’t enough, they all heard a voice from heaven saying the same thing that that same voice said from heaven when Jesus was baptized—“This is my Son, my beloved, listen to him.” Then it all ended, the light, the ancient prophets, the voice, the change in Jesus face, and they go down the mountain, and never speak of this incident again.

Now you have to wonder why Bill—whose capacity for rational thought, with his ability to express complex philosophical and theological concepts succinctly and eloquently, why this particular story would have so captured his imagination? After all, in Bill we had the privilege of knowing someone who could summarize centuries of Christian thought in a three page document, someone who could converse easily on matters of medieval theology, someone who could make canny connections between something he saw in the theatre with news of the current day—Bill was gifted with a mind that could comprehend complexity and make it accessible to the rest of us.

So what was it in that the weird and wonderful story of the Transfiguration of Jesus that drew Bill in? Well maybe it was the sheer absurdity of it because, after all, we know that Bill loved to laugh. Amongst the many things I’m going to miss about his presence is watching how his face could be transfigured from absolute seriousness to pure joy in just a nanosecond. How many times have I seen him express a theological point with great seriousness and then, watch his face transform as something strikes him as funny—and then that laugh with great joy. He had a childlike sense of wonder mixed with his professorial intelligence; it made it easy for him to relate to his children, his grandchildren, able to have a serious conversation in one moment and be dissolved in great laughter the next.

So maybe that’s it—maybe he was drawn to the story of the Transfiguration because it symbolized how you could be serious one moment and then transformed into laughter the next. But I think there’s something deeper here, something that bears not only on his scholarship but also on his experience of life, and it’s something that can give

us hope as we offer a Requiem for him today now that he has left this earthly life and is in the realm of God's eternal glory.

I think it's about the Eucharist; after all, his book is titled *Eucharist: Symbol of Transformation*; transformation is a synonym for transfiguration, they mean the same thing. Bill's spirituality was centred on the Eucharist, this gathering of the Christian community around bread and wine. From growing up in the Anglo Catholic parish of St. Thomas Toronto to his deep association with this Cathedral Church and St. James, the celebration of the Eucharist on particularly on Sunday was where he felt most at home. With Jean by his side, and often with his daughters and their families it was rare that he would miss a Sunday here—often calling in if he wasn't feeling well to let us know of his absence. When we were restoring this space not only did he provide invaluable work to articulate liturgical principles for space for worship—principles which have been shared across the Anglican Communion by the way—but he and Jean generously gave the Altar that is in the midst today, both of them involved in its design. The Eucharist as a symbol of transformation was at the heart of his scholarship and spirituality.

So the question is this, how does the Eucharist transform us? It transforms our perception of each other. When we gather around the bread and wine we remember that we are all deeply related to each other. We are connected to each other not by bloodlines but by the virtue of a shared humanity. As you enter more deeply into Eucharistic theology you realize that each one of us, made in the image of God, are the beloved of God just as the voice from the cloud described Jesus on the Mount of the Transfiguration, and in the Jordan River at his baptism. Each human being is God's beloved child and is invited into the holy work of the transformation of the world. That transformation is to change the world into a place of peace and justice rather than war and discrimination. It is to transform the world into being a place where all have food and shelter and the dignity that is afforded to God's beloved ones. In this way justice seeking and spirituality are not separate, they are fused—just like the human family and the earth is one, so is the pursuit of justice for all with spirituality. They are inseparable.

The light of God which shines through the transfiguration of Jesus is a light that penetrates even the darkness of our hearts inviting us to know ourselves as God's beloved ones, and to alter our perception of others to see in them the light of God as well. Bill concludes his book with a quote from the Catholic theologian Raimundo Panikkar who wrote: *The great challenge today is to convert the sacred bread into real bread, the liturgical peace into political peace, the worship of the Creator into reverence for the Creation, the Christian praying community into an authentic human fellowship. It is risky to celebrate the Eucharist. We may have to leave it unfinished, having gone first to give back to the poor what belongs to them.*"

Such radical thoughts were never far from Bill's mind, and as he and Jean grew older, they made wise choices for themselves, moving out of the family home, first into a condo, and then to the Terraces where they found community. Bill kept working as a scholar, continuing to be of service to the diocese and his parish as a wise theological advisor. When the Cathedral's bell spire was complete, it was Bill we looked to for

advice about when to ring the bells within the Eucharist. Theologically wary of a moment of consecration, he advised us to ring the bells at the conclusion of the Great Thanksgiving, after the congregation offers its Amen, because then Christ's transforming presence is complete—not through the words of the priest alone but through the whole community's affirmation.

While his scholarship has been a great gift to the church, his tender love towards his family is what marks him most as a gentle disciple of Jesus. His marriage to Jean for 58 years saw them navigate through many seasons of their life, as parents and professionals, as travelling companions, and in the last few years as partners in care as they each faced health challenges. I've always thought that his progressive views on gender were deeply influenced by living in a household with his intelligent wife and three wonderfully smart daughters. As a grandfather his sense of playfulness and joy brought nothing but affection to him from them and vice versa.

And now as we give thanks to God for his life so well lived we know that he has undergone another transfiguration. Just a few days before Bill died, the great Trappist monk and contemplative, Thomas Keating died. About death and dying, Keating wrote these words, *“The dying process is the culmination or the peak of the whole development of the spiritual journey, in which total surrender to God involves the gift of life itself. It's not really death, but life reaching out to a fullness that we can't imagine from this side of the dying process.”*

Life reaching out to a fullness—a transfiguration of all that is into the mystery of God. At the funeral of Dr. Christopher Lind a few years ago, Bill was the preacher, and his homily included these words, which I have adapted ever so slightly for today and with which I close. “At the heart of reality is a Love and an Energy that is stronger than death. This love and this energy is what Christians call God. God is the power of love and energy at the heart of the universe, and it is into the arms of this love and this energy that both Bill and his family are now enfolded.”

Thanks be to God for the gift of our friend and brother Bill Crockett. Amen.