

Transformation: The heart of our faith

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Alison Sampson, reflecting on John 9:1-41

The crowd was in uproar. ‘It’s him,’ some said. ‘Don’t be ridiculous!’ said others. ‘It’s just someone like him.’ ‘I’m still me,’ she said, ‘and this is what happened.’ But nobody was listening. Instead, the religiously righteous weighed in. ‘He changed at church, but it’s totally against God’s law,’ said some. But others wondered; and so they were divided.

Some in the crowd were saying she’s a sinner. Others blamed the parents. So they turned on the parents and demanded to know what had happened. Under the force of the crowd’s fear and loathing, the parents were afraid. ‘She’s still our kid,’ they said. ‘But we don’t know what happened. Ask her. She’s a grown up.’ And they slipped away.

So the religiously righteous interrogated her again. Who are you? Why did you change? How did this happen, and when? She pointed to Jesus and explained scripture to them. But this enraged them further, and they drove her away.

Jesus heard what had happened, and he sought her out. He found her far away from the church. There, he deepened her understanding even further, and she worshipped him. But she didn’t go back to her old community.

John 9 tells the story of a blind person being given sight, and a community’s outraged response. It could be the story of a miserly soul whose heart is healed, and who subsequently gives everything he has to the poor and triggers his wealthy children’s fury. It could be the story of a woman finding her voice, speaking truth to power, and experiencing significant blowback. Or it could be the story of a trans person becoming integrated.

‘It’s still me,’ she says, ‘in fact, this is who I really am, who I was all along.’ But nobody is listening. Instead, they argue about her; they drag in the parents; they try to apportion blame. They dismiss her own testimony and the way Jesus is visibly at work in her life. They ignore the fruit of the spirit. They claim to know the scriptures back to front but then, in rejecting her, they reject the law of love. Yet when they encounter Jesus themselves, they insist on their own righteousness. Jesus says to them, ‘If you simply didn’t

see, that would be fine. As long as you claim to have all the answers, you continue to live in sin.’

Again and again in the gospel, people are changed by an encounter with Jesus. Again and again, it leads to uproar. Their families are afraid, their communities are enraged, and powerful religious types can’t stand it. ‘How dare you!’ they thunder. How dare you see clearly, walk freely, speak publicly, or ask to be called by another name! Which is weird, because transformation is at the heart of our faith.

A motley group of fishermen, tax collectors, sinful men and wicked women encounter Jesus. Their hearts swell within them and they are transformed into wholehearted disciples, active apostles, missionaries, church planters, preachers. They change, and the world changes with them.

Saul encounters Jesus on the road, and his whole world is turned upside down. He thought he saw, but he was struck blind, and then he began to see. He is transformed from vicious religious thug to passionate proclaimer of the gospel, and henceforth asks to be known as Paul. He changes, right down to his name, and the world changes with him.

Bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ; a little boy’s lunch becomes a miracle of abundance; a tiny seed becomes habitat for birds; a bath becomes a river crossing becomes a cleansing of hearts and minds, a grafting into the body, a death, new life, and so much more. When placed in God’s hands, everything and everyone are transformed.

Jesus changes too. He is baptised, and something like a bird lands on his head. He climbs a mountain, and his face is transfigured into light. He is challenged by an Indigenous Canaanite woman, and his ministry focus changes. He is executed, buried, and raised again, into new but still recognisable form. Again and again, Jesus is transformed, moving always towards a bigger, wilder, realer self aligned ever more closely with God.

So I find it bizarre when people who claim to follow Jesus reject change in themselves and others. ‘You want to be called Paul? How dare you, you woke snowflake! We know who you really are, Saul, and you’re staying that way, Saul.’

‘You’re finding your voice? You think you have something to say? Well, listen to this, little lady: Women don’t speak in church, and this pulpit belongs to me.’

‘You think you’re the expert in your own life and your encounter with Christ? As if! Your way of life is a choice, and a sin. We know scripture, we know what it’s all about: but as for you? You have no idea.’

To these angry, suffocating, fearful people Jesus might say, ‘If you simply didn’t see, that would be fine. But as long as you claim to have all the answers, you continue to live in sin.’

But to those who are willing to live with mystery, with humility, with hearts wide open to God and others, perhaps he would say something else. Because the chapter headings in our Bibles are arbitrary, and Jesus’ words in chapter 9 roll right into chapter 10. I am the gate, he goes on to say. My sheep hear my voice. I came that they may have life, and have it in abundance.

Abundant life, like when a trans person transitions into their real self, and their community trusts their testimony, embraces them, protects them from any uproar, and is careful to use their pronouns and their new, true name.

Abundant life, like when a gay couple comes out of the shadows, and finds their marriage is honoured and their baby enfolded by tenderness, by love, by blessing.

Abundant life, like when a rainbow becomes a promise of no more retribution. It’s the life where a person in their eighties embraces something new, and a person in their nineties is still growing. It’s the life where ordinary people like you and me come together to form the body of Christ, a praying community, a sharing economy, a witness to love. It’s the life where people hear deep truths, glimpse heavenly realities, and continually grow and change.

As those who seek to listen to Jesus’ voice, let us be open to the myriad mysteries of life and the diversity of gospel living. Let us allow God to continually transform us into our bigger, wilder, realer selves. As we change to become more aligned with Christ, there will be times when we experience pushback: from family, friends, community, from the religiously self-righteous, and even from within our own hearts. When this happens, let us stand firm with our eyes on Christ and our orientation towards love. And in all things, at every age and stage, let us never, ever, ever be afraid to change. In the name of the One who continually makes and remakes the world: Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer: Amen. Ω