



from the Mountaintop to The Rock

In the last two weeks, thirty of us from St James's have been to the theatre to see the new West End musical *Come From Away*. It's been much on my mind since and especially as I've been thinking about that strange Gospel passage we've just heard: Luke's account of the Transfiguration on the mountain top. Taking what we might call his inner circle, Peter, James and John – the same three disciples who are with him when he raises Jairus' daughter from death – Jesus ascends the mountain to pray and his outward appearance is changed. His face shines with brilliance and his clothes become dazzling white. Moses and Elijah, the long-dead Old Testament prophets appear, talking to him about his departure which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.

Peter and his companions are weighed down with sleep and confused, and don't really know what to make of what they've seen and heard, so they say nothing. I suspect they may need time to process it, to work out not just what it means for Jesus but what it might mean for them.

Come From Away has proved been a runaway hit in Toronto, Canada and in America, in addition to a national tour has had seasons in San Diego, Seattle, Washington DC and since February 2017 has been playing to standing-room-only audiences on Broadway. The London show has just opened, having transferred fresh from a season in Dublin and looks set to run for a very long time.

The show is set in the small town of Gander on Newfoundland also known as The Rock - a Canadian island off the east coast of the North American mainland. Built in the mid-thirties, the airport in Gander was initially a military base shared by the USA, England and Canada. When it opened in 1938, it was the largest airport in the

world. It was a major refuelling spot until the advent of long-haul flights rendered it largely redundant, except as a refuelling stop for private and corporate jets. The town which grew up around the aviation industry dwindled.

On September 11th 2001, following the terrorist attacks which involved the hijacking of four commercial flights, for the first time in history a complete closure of the North American airspace was ordered. This resulted in about 235 inbound international flights having to land in Canada. Rather than the usual 6 flights a day that the town was used to seeing, 38 planes, carrying a total of nearly 7000 passengers from all over the world, landed in Gander, population 9,000.

Come From Away isn't a 9/11 musical per se, and in any language, that very phrase sounds wrong, but rather it tells the story of the ensuing extraordinary days when the townspeople came together to welcome these 'plane people' or 'come from aways' (the local term for anyone not from Newfoundland) with extraordinary generosity, kindness and compassion. Many of these stories have made it into print but it's thanks to this musical that this story is finally reaching a mass audience, so rest assured, for those who still want to see it but weren't able to join us recently, I'll try to avoid too many 'plot spoilers' in my reflections this morning.

In a nutshell, the Gander town mayor declared a state of emergency, and as if it was the most natural thing in the world, the islanders went into overdrive, turning every available space – schools, colleges, halls, scout huts - into makeshift shelters and getting together, in a matter of hours, all manner of provisions: food, bedding, toiletries, nappies, baby food, medication, spare clothes and anything they

could think of that the 'come from aways' might need. The flight crews and staff were put up in local hotels so they could rest ready for when the skies re-opened. The townspeople stayed up cooking through the night for thousands of people; local stores donated all manner of supplies without expecting any payment; local chemists set about fulfilling prescriptions – also at no charge. So much food was donated that they ran out of fridge space; the mayor closed the town's ice hockey rink so that it could temporarily become the world's largest walk in fridge. Many of the volunteers stayed up round the clock for over four days to ensure that the needs of these bewildered, frightened, stranded plane people were met.

In the days before mobile phones were commonplace, banks of phones and computers were set up in cafeterias available for use round the clock for people to contact family from wherever they came from – again at no charge. Since seeing the show I've been reading some of the first-hand accounts of people who found themselves stranded in Gander during those remarkable days and their accounts of the natural kindness of the townspeople is almost comic. Passengers who'd gone out for a walk for some fresh air and to take in their surroundings would find multiple cars pulling up to ask if they needed a lift anywhere. It seems that Gander is the kind of place we tend to think has become extinct, where people really don't lock their doors. Two African women, having been invited by one of the local women to go on right ahead and use the shower in her house right opposite their shelter tried knocking unsuccessfully for two days because she was out volunteering leaving the door (as always) unlocked, but they simply could not comprehend that she really meant what she said – just go right on in and help yourselves; make yourselves at home.

The people of Gander and the surrounding towns, really went the extra mile: inviting people into their homes to stay in spare bedrooms, to have a shower, to use the phone or computer, and in some cases, to drink their finest whiskey, all with

the ingrained, "well-you'd-do-the-same-for-us" mindset. They organised cookouts and outings, proud to show off the beauty of their island, and organised lively dances always with the infectious Gaelic folk music that is such a central part of the show.

It still seems strange that a story coming out of 9/11 should be so joyous and life-affirming, but that's not to say that the show shies away from the horror and tragedy of that day. There are some intensely moving moments, including the friendship of two women, both mothers of firefighters: the islander who comforts Hannah as she desperately awaits news of her son who works with a New York City rescue crew. There's also the undercurrents of emerging Islamophobia towards an Egyptian passenger.

There are a number of scenes that spoke to me of transfiguration – not necessarily seeing ourselves as we truly are but of experiencing events that raise questions about our identity. There's the discombobulation of - when finally being allowed off the plane and taken to the shelters - waking up the next morning in a crowded room full of strangers and feeling very alone; of the survivors' guilt of being so far from home and yet realising that you are also far from the danger. There's the recognition that any of them could have died that day before – and now here they are in a strange place wearing donated clothes and somehow looking and feeling different, asking themselves "Who am I if I don't feel like the me from yesterday? blinking as they struggle to recognise the person looking back at them in the mirror"¹.

There were also shining moments of transfiguration: moments of breakthrough and connection, when hostility and fear are overcome. Arriving at one of the shelters on a bus in the middle of the night, an African family are clearly terrified and no one speaks their language. The bus driver spots that the wife is holding a Bible and asks to see it. Although he doesn't recognise the words, he can identify the names of the books and the chapters and verses. He finds and points them to Philippians 4:6 – 'Be anxious

¹ This paragraph draws some of the lyrics from the song *Costume Party* from *Come From Away*

for nothing' and the driver and husband announce together "That's how we started speaking the same language."² In a climate in which Bible quotes and passages are so often taken out of context to divide, judge and even condemn, this moment really took my breath away.

The hymn *Make Me a Channel of Your Peace*, based on the prayer attributed to St Francis of Assisi is woven into a song in which people of four different faiths - Christian, Muslim, Jewish and Hindu - are praying. They are not praying together as such, but praying in the same space and the arrangement is exquisite. As a scene, it is simple, honest and deeply moving. The character who starts singing the song is based on Kevin Tuerff - a lapsed Catholic. Having read his memoir in the last couple of days, this lapse came from a sense of deep betrayal when the Catholic Church denounced homosexuality when he was in his early 20's and on bishop's orders, the church LGBT support group he valued so much was forced to close. This song came back to Kevin during his days in Gander, and again, when days later his flight had to return to Paris before he could finally make his way back to the US, he went to Mass at Notre Dame Cathedral.

Kevin has since moved from Austin, Texas to New York City, attends a Catholic Church that has an extensive ministry to immigrants and asylum seekers and on 11th September 2002 founded the *Pay It Forward 9/11* movement, which has encouraged thousands of people to undertake random acts of kindness as a tribute to first responders and those who were killed, and in acknowledgement of the kindness shown by the people of Gander. It is a movement encouraging not just kindness but unity.

Transfiguration runs throughout the many threads of these many stories, as does the islanders' response whenever they are thanked – "ah sure, you'd have done the same for us." In

the days following, when both islanders and come from aways return to what used to be normal, for all of them there is a sense that things have changed irrevocably and are somehow diminished, not just – as it did for so many – in a global sense, but in a personal sense. For the townspeople, Gander suddenly seemed quiet and empty, one of the plane people has no idea how to explain to family that 'I wasn't just okay, I was better' when I was in Gander.³

Lori Brandt Hale writes that "the Transfiguration of Jesus offers a glimpse of what is possible, not only for Jesus, but for humanity."⁴ Since seeing *Come From Away*, I've been thinking about what it is that has captured the imagination of so many audiences and feel that perhaps it's because in the most open hearted way possible, it takes faith seriously; not just one faith but many faiths, whilst also offering a glimpse of what is possible for humanity. As we've heard this morning, when Jesus comes down from the mountain, he heals a boy with an unclean spirit and restores him to his desperate father. As Christians, seeing Jesus differently, however fleetingly, means seeing ourselves and others differently too.

Come From Away is a brilliant story, brilliantly told, in a world that so often feels riven with the rhetoric of division, hatred and othering this is a much needed story of hospitality, sanctuary, generosity and unity. The stories of 9000 islanders and 7000 'come from aways' are told by a cast of 12 actors, with a band of 8, and 12 chairs and 2 tables. Of necessity, some of the stories are tweaked and some of the characters are composite, but this enhances rather than detracts and one of its particular strengths is that equal weight is given to both the islanders and the plane people, with some wonderfully deft switches, denoted by the simple donning of a hat and lighting change of accent.

In so many of the parables Jesus tells, he is challenging his audience to put themselves in the

² *Darkness and Trees (Reprise)*
<https://themusicalcompany.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/CFA-digital-lyric-booklet-4-5.pdf>
³ *Something's Missing* <https://themusicalcompany.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/CFA-digital-lyric-booklet-4-5.pdf>

⁴ David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C Volume 1* (Kindle Location 15755). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

position of the different characters he brings to their attention – and to ask themselves what would I do? When I read Luke’s account of the Transfiguration, I wonder how I’d feel and what I’d do if I were Peter, James or John, not just on the mountain top, but in the days following, back down below and on the road to Jerusalem.

Lent begins on Wednesday, a season in which traditionally, we are called to self-examination; study of scripture; and the giving of alms. Perhaps for those of us lucky enough to have seen *Come From Away* and for those who may yet see it, we might approach Lent asking ourselves would we really, *really truly*, have done the same as the people of Gander; how can we use the Bible to reassure and bring people together; and how can we practice random acts of kindness?

And so I finish with the prayer behind the song that has come to mean so much to one of the come from aways.

Lord, make us instruments of your peace,
Where there is hatred, let us sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is darkness, light;
Where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master,
Grant that we may not so much seek to be
consoled
As to console,
To be understood as to understand;
To be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive,
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.
Amen.

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