

Transfiguration February 11, 2018

2 Kings 2:1-12, Ps 50:1-6, 2 Cor 4:3-6, Mark 9:2-9

God's glory and suffering merge

Some people feel embarrassed talking about God, so they tend to refer to God as 'him up there', pointing to the sky. For them and others in our culture, God (male) resides up in the sky, never beside them or below them. In the Bible too, God is sometimes pictured as up in the sky or on a mountain.

I invite you now to imagine that you are a 1st century Jew; in particular, one of Jesus' disciples, Peter, James or John. In our story today you are following Jesus up a mountain. As you climb, you are thinking about mountains. You know that mountains are often places where in the past, Jews met God and talked with God. It was an experience that could change people. Mount Sinai in the Sinai desert, was called the mountain of God and was a holy place where Moses talked with God, and received directions on how to free his fellow Hebrews from slavery in Egypt.

And there were later times when Moses was leading the people from Egypt through the desert to the Promised Land, and climbed Mount Sinai to speak with God. He would enter a cloud covering the peak of the mountain and receive instructions about how the people were to worship God and how they were to behave. It was on Mount Sinai that God gave Moses the two stone tablets containing the Ten Commandments. Once when Moses came back down the mountain to the people, the skin on his face shone, although he did not know it. When others told him, he covered his face with a veil except when he talked to God on the mountain.

As a close disciple you remember the time Jesus took you and 11 others up a mountain and gave you authority to be apostles, to preach the good news of God's love and cast out demons. You also think about how Jesus often likes to pray to God on a mountain. Was Jesus going to pray this time, you wonder?

When you arrive at the top of the mountain you see a vision more amazing than anything you could have expected. You are terrified. You see Jesus' clothes suddenly white and shining. Moses and Elijah who are dead appear speaking with him. What has happened! Surely this is a door into heaven!

Soon Peter, as leader, feels he must respond to this astonishing experience. He wants to stop time and make what he sees last for ever. He says he will construct tents or dwelling places, where these three people, Jesus, Moses and Elijah can live for ever on the mountain. But that was not going to happen.

At this point a cloud comes, a mist, making it difficult for any of you to see. You remember how God spoke in a cloud to Moses on a mountain top, would God speak to you? God does speak, telling you Jesus is God's beloved son, and you are told to listen to him. The cloud disappears. When you and the others look around, there is now only Jesus, the Jesus you know or thought you knew...

All of us, at some time in our lives, will have been entranced and taken to another place by something we see. A mountain peak, is sometimes regarded as a 'thin' place. The air has less oxygen, but it also can refer to that barrier which hides the wonders of heaven from us on earth. Such a barrier becomes so thin on a mountain some believe you can glimpse the glory of God shining through. But such an experience is not limited to mountain tops.

For many of us it can be the beauty of something in nature—a sunrise or sunset, for example, which may last for a while giving us a moving panorama of colours, or a brief glimpse of light shining behind a cloud that transfixes us and we can think of nothing else for a few moments. The other day I was held by the view of the sunlight falling on branches of a gum tree immediately following rain which caused the leaves to glisten with drops of water. It may happen to us when we are looking out to sea or in a church, and it can involve any of our senses.

A few weeks ago, I took a funeral at which an a cappella music group sang just before the service began. I thanked them, and the only adjective I could think of to describe their music was 'beautiful', which seemed very inadequate. The harmony was so lovely, it was like a glimpse of glory. We might also see something of God's glory in a loving relationship between two people, or in a book we are reading that moves us.

But what, we might ask, is the purpose of visions, of Peter, James and John seeing Jesus transfigured? Why are we given opportunities to glimpse God's glory?

This year, the story of the transfiguration of Jesus comes in the church's year, halfway between Christmas and Easter. There are seven weeks between Christmas Eve and today, and seven weeks between today and Easter Day. Today is a turning point where we leave Christmas and the start of Jesus' ministry, and turn with him towards Jerusalem. In the church's year Lent begins on Wednesday, leading us to Good Friday and the cross. We are in an in-between place where we can pause for a moment and reflect on both the glory and suffering in the life of Jesus, and how they are expressions of God's love for us. In Luke's account of the transfiguration, chapter 9:31, Moses and Elijah speak to Jesus about "his departure, which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem". Surrounded by glory, it is Jesus' death and resurrection that is discussed. This double theme of glory and suffering is also seen in our other readings today.

In the Old Testament, we had the account of Elijah leaving his disciple and friend Elisha. Elisha didn't want Elijah to leave him, but eventually Elijah ascended into heaven in a whirlwind. It was a glorious and painful drawn out farewell for Elisha. It ended in his strengthening and guidance to continue Elijah's work for God.

Paul in 2 Corinthians talks about light shining out of darkness and the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. He could be referring to the light of God penetrating the darkness at the time of creation, or more likely the glory of God shining in the ministry and death of Christ overcoming the darkness of sin, ignorance, and suffering.

The purpose of the transfiguration of Jesus was not, as Peter found out, for all to stop on the mountain, set up three tents and praise Jesus, Moses and Elijah. Rather it was a reminder of God's power and wonder which is expressed in God's decision to enter our world and accept the cost of Jesus' pain, suffering and death. After Jesus' transfiguration in Mark's Gospel, Jesus deliberately, physically and metaphorically, turned to journey from the north of Palestine towards Jerusalem in the south, to meet his death and resurrection. He was directed and strengthened for what lay ahead. When Jesus accompanied Peter, James and John down the mountain, he told them to keep what they had seen a secret until he had risen from the dead. Then they would better understand what it was really about.

For us today, we have come to the end of the celebrations of Christmas and Epiphany and the summer holiday season. Visitors who have been enjoying our beaches have mostly returned home. Schools have reopened and all businesses are back at work. We, too, have turned from a Christmas holiday mode to facing the year ahead with all it might bring.

When Jesus, Peter, James and John arrived at the base of the mountain, they were immediately faced with a rowdy challenging situation. The glory of God they had just experienced must have rapidly become like a dream as they confronted a large crowd of people shouting and arguing, a sick boy foaming at the mouth and rolling on the ground, and the failure of disciples to heal him. Where was the glory of God? Jesus may have wished for an easier return to daily life, but he engaged with the situation, listened to the father of the sick boy and then cast out an evil spirit from the boy. The boy lay like a corpse, but Jesus took his hand and raised him to new life. Here the glory of God showed in the dying and living.

We, too, sometimes find we have come down to earth after a wonderful experience, and are confronted by difficulties. We seem to be in a dark place. How can we possibly live out our calling as Christians ministering to others in this mess? We feel a failure, but Jesus is still with us where we are, he is the light in our lives that darkness cannot fully overcome. This may be a time for us to deliberately follow Jesus, perhaps to Jerusalem, listening to and being guided by his words and actions, and working to gradually bring about changes by engaging with the energy of God's love.

If we are open to glimpses of the glory of God in everyday life, they will encourage, strengthen and change us. We can draw on their memory as we grapple with the anxieties and sufferings in our lives. I believe that the reality of the glory of God surrounds us even when we cannot see it, hear it or feel it. It is something which is able to hold us when we are in pain, when we are frightened, when we feel a failure and want to give up, and even when we feel we are falling down a bottomless dark abyss. The glory of God is both gentle and strong because it is part of God's powerful love for us shown in Jesus Christ, that can embrace and transform our whole lives, and shine through us to others, and through others to us.

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