

3 March 2019
Sunday next before Lent

Let us draw near to God and to his love, and he will draw near to us. Amen.

One autumn, Sherlock Holmes, and Dr Watson, were hiking on Dartmoor. After a long day's exercise, and as it was growing very dark in that remote place, they pitched their tent under a cloudless sky and went to sleep. During the night, Holmes woke Dr Watson and said, "Watson, look up and tell me what you see." Watson replied, "I see millions of amazingly bright stars." Holmes continued, "And what do you deduce from that, dear Watson?" His friend thoughtfully considered and then said, "Why, that there are so many stars out there that some of them must be quite like our own sun and that there's a good chance that some of those stars might have planets quite like our own earth and that some of those planets might support some form of life." "Watson!" retorted an exasperated Holmes, "The sight of all those stars simply means that somebody has stolen our tent!"

You may well have heard this yarn before, but it makes a good point; sometimes we are so struck by the awesomeness of something we encounter and are struggling to find words to describe how we feel about it and what we think that it might signify, that we risk overlooking the obvious and missing something simple, but fundamental, about the experience. Like Dr Watson, the disciples, in our gospel reading this morning, apparently fail to see or to understand what is right in front of them.

The story follows Peter's insightful confession of Jesus as Messiah, and Jesus' teaching concerning the Son of Man and risks of discipleship, but shows that the disciples haven't yet understood any of these things.

Jesus went with Peter and John and James up the mountain to pray. While he was praying, and the disciples were struggling to stay awake, Jesus was joined by none other than Moses and Elijah, and Jesus' face and clothing changed, so that they radiated a dazzling brilliance. As the disciples looked on in amazement, surely now fully awake, Jesus discussed with Moses and Elijah what was about to unfold in Jerusalem; the very events that Jesus had foretold just a week earlier. Peter wanted desperately to hang on to this holy moment indefinitely, and suggested that small dwellings be built for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. But he had hardly spoken before a cloud engulfed the mountain and the voice of God spoke out of the cloud, in a similar way to that which it had at Jesus' baptism. When the cloud lifted, Moses and Elijah had gone, leaving Jesus with his three disciples. They descended the mountain

in silence; the disciples probably made speechless by the experience, and Jesus possibly meditating on his recent conversation with Moses and Elijah and about his Father's words.

That is an outline summary of this story. At first, its meaning is obscure; the story wanders about and nothing is really explained. Jesus does not discuss the event with his disciples on the way back down the mountain, as he does on other occasions. Luke does not help us very much here; the disciples, and now we, are somewhat confused.

But there is one thing that is clear; throughout the story, Luke tells us, with conviction, about the blazing glory of Jesus Christ. And, if we dig more deeply, many of the curious details of the story can be seen to support the insight that everything points, in fact, to Jesus Christ and to his glory as it shone on that mountain on that day. As we explore the story, we too can catch a glimpse of something amazing and, like those disciples before us, look on in awe.

Firstly, Jesus transformed; his face shone and his garments became radiant. This unmistakably echoes the story in Exodus about the face of Moses shining as he returned from the top of Mount Sinai after being in the presence of God; as God's glory once was reflected in Moses' face, now it is reflected in Jesus' face and clothing and, moreover, Jesus embodies that glory. On that mountain, Jesus' glory dazzled the eyes of the astonished disciples.

Then there is the behaviour of Peter, who has been accused of being insensitive and thoughtless. Was he simply awestruck and trying to express a wish to celebrate and to delight in the glory of Jesus? Luke comments that Peter did not know what he was saying. This is the same Peter who recently identified Jesus, with conviction, as "The Messiah of God;" so, it's not hard to imagine that, in this holy place, Peter continues that witness by wanting to lift up and to praise the momentous glory of Jesus. Alternatively, it is possible that Peter was trying to harness and to preserve Jesus' glory in some way, as one might harness and preserve earthly or human things; with no appreciation that Jesus' glory is of God's kingdom and cannot be treated in that way. Whether Peter begins to see the unlimited expanse of the glory of Jesus and is moved to witness to it, or sees that glory and wants to seize it, to bind it, and even to institutionalize it, as many humans do with such things, does not matter in the end; both interpretations point to the glory of Jesus.

Another important detail is the voice from heaven, coming from the cloud which had suddenly and frighteningly enveloped the gathering. God's voice speaks out and says, "This is my Son, my Chosen. Listen to him." Or should that be "Listen to *him*"? One point that is easy to overlook today, because of our 2000 year association with New Testament scripture, is that the very idea that Jesus could be

more important than Moses, the mediator of the old covenant, pointing back to the old Exodus, when he led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, and Elijah, the greatest prophet, pointing to the future, was both revelatory and revolutionary to first century Jews. That imperative, "Listen to *him*," shockingly proclaims and highlights the unsurpassable glory of Jesus. And, as the cloud lifts, it is Jesus alone who remains with his disciples.

Finally, the story of the Transfiguration is a pivotal moment in Luke's gospel. Previously, Jesus had ministered in Galilee, where he taught, preached and healed. Afterwards, Jesus made his way slowly and deliberately to Jerusalem, where he would be betrayed and would suffer and die. In subsequent passages Jesus himself soon makes this clear, "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands." And then we are told that Jesus 'set his face to go to Jerusalem.' The face that had shone with radiant brilliance in conversation with Moses and Elijah was soon to be set with purpose and determination for God's plan of salvation for all of humankind. Jesus' Transfiguration glory shines, albeit in different ways, on both sides of this moment; in his ministry to the poor and needy, and in his death, resurrection and ascension.

Indeed, Transfiguration glory also points further ahead, to the time when Jesus will return and his glory will be fully revealed. Former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, said in his book 'The Dwelling of the Light', "When Jesus is transfigured, it is as if there is a brief glimpse of the end of all things; the world aflame with God's light. In the strength of that glimpse, things become possible. We can confront today's business with new thoughts and feelings, reflect on our sufferings and our failures with some degree of hope – not with a nice and easy message of consolation but with the knowledge that there a depth to the world's reality and out of that comes the light which will somehow connect, around and in Jesus Christ, all the complex, painful, shapeless experience of human beings."*

Two things I therefore commend to you:

- 1) Make time and space for approaching God, having conversations with him and gazing on his radiant glory. Do not worry about trying to understand everything or about analysing it; there will be time enough for that on another occasion. Just be there, in God's presence; for we cannot spend our time regularly in God's close company and working at living his way without it energizing us and causing his radiance to shine in our lives too. And we shall need this, both to fuel our work of sharing the gospel and caring for those in need, and to sustain ourselves in times of difficulty.

- 2) Whenever and wherever you meet with God, resist the temptation to linger too long, hanging on to the moment of joy, not wanting to let it pass; for worship, ministry and mission must all be a careful blend of the experiential and contemplative and of the actively participative to be most effective; and there is much work to be done.

Let us pray:

Transfigured Lord, may I listen to your truth spoken by the prophets and written by the evangelists; may I hear your voice calling me, affirming me as your child, and may I worship you in reverence and awe and sometimes shine with your glory.

Amen.

*Williams, Rowan. *The Dwelling of the Light*. Norwich: The Canterbury Press, 2003.