

A Glimpse of Glory

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A sermon given on Sunday 11th February 2024 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: 2 Corinthians 4:3-6, Mark 9:2-9

Introduction: a new perspective

Can you think of a time when you saw someone in a new light? When perhaps a side of that person that you had never seen came to the fore? It might have been a shy person who confidently made a public speech, or someone you thought was calm and rational make a big show of emotion. How did that experience change your perception of that person?

Put yourself in the position of Peter, James and John. Can you imagine what the experience of seeing Jesus "transfigured" was like for them?

A divine revelation

The event that has come to be known as the Transfiguration is a very significant point in the narrative of Mark's gospel. We, the readers, have known from the opening words of the book that Jesus is the Christ, or Messiah, and the Son of God. But this has not been obvious to the people around Jesus. We see the disciples, the crowds, the religious leaders and even his family wondering what to make of him. From time to time we hear the demons calling him "the holy one of

God”¹, or “the Son of God”² or “Son of the most high God”³, but Jesus commands them to be quiet. But had the disciples really understood that Jesus was the Son of God? And what exactly did that mean? Pagan rulers were often called sons of a god, even though their human parents were known.

You will remember that at Jesus’ baptism God the Father speaks to Jesus and says “You are my Son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased”. But it’s not clear who else heard this voice.

Now, though, Jesus’ three closest disciples, Peter, James and John, hear a voice from heaven saying “This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him!”⁴

This event follows an important turning point in the story: in chapter 8 Jesus asks his disciples who people say he is, and then who *they* think he is, and Peter pipes up with “You are the Messiah”⁵. Now on the mountain, away from the crowds and the other disciples, Peter, James and John see a glimpse of the glory of the Son of God and hear the voice of God the Father confirming that Jesus is his own Son. It’s a very frightening experience for them.

But this revelation to the three disciples doesn’t only show who Jesus really is. It also shows the place of Jesus in God’s purposes for the world. The disciples see Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah. Moses was the one through whom God

¹ Mark 1:24

² Mark 3:11

³ Mark 5:7

⁴ Mark 9:7 NRSV

⁵ Mark 8:29

had given the Law to his people Israel, a set of instructions about how to live as God's chosen people, so that his nature and character would be shown to the wider world. Elijah was seen as the greatest of the prophets, the messengers whom God sent from time to time throughout the history of Israel to help them to stay on the straight and narrow, to warn them when they went astray and to encourage and comfort them when things went wrong. For the Jews, "the Law and the Prophets" represented God's complete revelation of himself to his people Israel.

And now here on the mountain is Jesus, talking with Moses and Elijah, Jesus the Son of God in human form. A few days before, after Peter declared that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus had told his disciples that he must suffer and die. Jesus is the final piece in God's plan for not only his people Israel, but for the world. The Messiah, the Son of God himself, must die on a cross and rise again to bring salvation to the world.

None of this makes much sense to Peter, James and John at the time, as the following verses make clear. It's all too overwhelming. But for us, with the benefit of hindsight, and with the rest of the New Testament to explain it to us, there's a revelation of how God chose to respond to the brokenness of the world.

The response of Peter

Let's take a few moments to think about those three disciples. What on earth is going on in Peter's intervention? Feeling that he ought to say something in response to the vision of Moses and Elijah, Peter blurts out

‘Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.’

Mark tells us that he didn’t know what to say, as he and his 2 fellow disciples were “terrified”.⁶ Have you ever reacted to an overwhelming situation by saying something ridiculous? I have!

Perhaps it’s the practical side of Peter coming out. Making a shelter for Jesus, Moses and Elijah is something he knows what to do. But that isn’t what is required right now. The voice from heaven says, “This is my Son, the Beloved; *listen* to him!”⁷

How do we respond to what God has revealed to us about Jesus? Are we ready to listen to Jesus, before trying to make ourselves busy and useful? Of course there’s an important place for doing practical things to serve God – and we value all those practical contributions that people make to the running of this church. But all of us also need to take time to contemplate the glory of God, to listen to what God is wanting to say to us. You have all made the right choice today by coming to this church to worship, to pray and to listen to what God wants to say to you by the Holy Spirit. Listening to God doesn’t just mean hearing words – it includes making ourselves open to God communicating with us. It could be by words we hear with our ears, through thoughts the Holy Spirit puts into our heads, through experiencing music or silence, through receiving Holy Communion, and in other ways too. Perhaps this coming

⁶ Mark 9:5-6

⁷ Mark 9:7 NRSV

period of Lent could be your opportunity to spend more time in prayer, to join a house group, to make it a priority to get to church every Sunday and open yourself to God?

A future glory

As they are going down the mountain, back to the reality of ordinary life, Jesus tells them not to say anything to anyone “until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead”. In the previous chapter, after Peter had made his statement of faith that Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus had told them that he “must undergo great suffering ... and be killed, and after three days rise again”⁸. And he followed this by saying that those who want to follow him must also be prepared to “take up their cross”⁹.

Jesus does not promise his followers an easy life. The glimpse that the three disciples had of Jesus’ glory would help them later make sense of his death and resurrection. And for suffering Christians later, including those who read Mark’s gospel, this vision of Jesus’ glory, and of Moses and Elijah, would encourage them to persevere through suffering to receive their own crown of glory in God’s eternal kingdom.

You and I may not have had the kind of vision or revelation which Peter, James and John had on that mountain. But I am sure that in one way or another God has spoken to you, whether today in church or on other occasions. You may not have had many amazing spiritual experiences, but over the

⁸ Mark 8:31 NRSV

⁹ Mark 8:34

years you have experienced something of God's faithfulness to you, his strength in difficult times, his comfort brought to you through others, his guidance and inspiration. You may not be an expert in Biblical knowledge or theology, but you have come to believe in Jesus and decided to follow him. Don't minimise or explain away what God has done in your life. Take time to thank God for what he has done for you, and when the going gets tough, count your blessings.

In the words of the letter to the Hebrews,

let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.¹⁰

And let's not keep God's blessings to ourselves: just as the disciples were called to share what God had revealed to them with others, so we also have a message to share. Others need to know who Jesus is, and what he has done for them. They too need to hear that God wants to help them, guide them, bless them and use them to spread his love. Let's not keep the glimpse of glory that we have received to ourselves, but rejoice in it, be encouraged by it, and share it with others.

Collect

Almighty Father,
whose Son was revealed in majesty
before he suffered death upon the cross:

¹⁰ Hebrews 12:1b-2 NRSV

give us grace to perceive his glory,
that we may be strengthened to suffer with him
and be changed into his likeness, from glory to glory;
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.