

The Transfiguration – Luke 9.28-43

Sermon given by Garth Raybould on 14 January 2010

The church where I was brought up – a Methodist church in the Midlands – had a Guild, the equivalent I suppose of our Men’s Fellowship, Mothers’ Union and Trinity Ladies combined. They met every week, and had alternating devotional evenings, literary evenings and musical evenings. Every two or three years they had the Wolverhampton Orpheus Male Voice Choir to come and entertain. In the choir there was a little tenor, a red-faced man, completely bald, and it used to amuse me that the top of his shone as it reflected the lights of the church hall. These days, I sing with Formby Choral Society, and I was mortified but I suppose not surprised when Jean told me that my head reflected the spotlights. Sometimes, when I think about it, I rub a bit of talcum powder into my head to try and stop it glistening with the excitement of the occasion.

There are stories about artists or writers or musicians who seem to glow when the inspiration is upon them, and there are some people who say that something like that was happening to Jesus at the Transfiguration. Frankly, I think if that had been the reason for his change of appearance it wouldn’t have been worth a mention in the gospel among all the other wonders of his life. This was something more – much more. Luke says Jesus’ clothes were as bright as a flash of lightning. Matthew says his face was shining like the sun.

As with many of the stories about Jesus, there are those who say this didn’t really happen – it’s an allegory, a symbolic story about Jesus preparing for his death. Well, it’s certainly symbolic. Jesus meets Moses and Elijah up a mountain. Moses met God on a mountain and he brought down the tablets of the law. When he came down from the mountain his face shone because he’d been face to face with God. He had to wear a veil because the reflected light of God was too much for people to look at. Elijah met God on a mountain and received encouragement and guidance from God when he felt at a low point. Mountaintops are symbolic of the high points of our lives, our achievements, and they’re places where we see grand vistas and perhaps get a better idea of the path we need to take.

The symbolism of Jesus being on the mountaintop is that he is drawing on the whole tradition of the Jewish law and the prophets to strengthen himself for the ordeal ahead. He’s receiving confirmation from God that the path he is about to take, the path of suffering and sacrifice, is truly the fulfilment of his life’s work.

So yes, the story is symbolic. But as always there are little details that tell us it’s true. The sleepiness of the three disciples. And of course that whole thing about Peter and the shelters. Luke says Peter didn’t know what he was saying – it’s as if he has to put this in the story because he knows it happened but he’s a bit embarrassed about it really.

Peter says, “Jesus, shall we put up three tents, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah?” It does seem a slightly dotty thing to say. But actually, in his own mind, Peter had a good reason for the question. He knew he was in the presence of God. He knew that, as well as any human can, he was witnessing the glory of God in all its fullness and greatness and splendour. And he wanted to capture the moment. He knew that in ancient Jewish history a tent or tabernacle had been used to symbolise the presence of God. He knew now that God was on the mountaintop in those three figures and he wanted to pin them down, to make the moment last forever in a way that he could understand in simple human terms. He wanted to keep that closeness to God, but of course he wanted to do it in the wrong way. Our God is not to be contained. The very presence of Moses and Elijah there on the mountaintop with Jesus showed that God can’t be restricted by time or place. He is the God of everywhere and always. No matter what mind-numbing discoveries are made about the size of our universe or the enormity of time, our God is greater.

This is a great and wonderful moment for those three disciples – and what a contrast with what happens the next day, when Jesus and the disciples come down from the mountain. They’re immediately engulfed in a chaotic crowd. In the middle of the crowd there’s a boy kicking and

screaming in an epileptic attack, and his father is crying and shouting, berating the other disciples for not being able to help him. The father implores Jesus to help the boy. It's a frightening scene. The nine disciples who didn't go up the mountain have been given power to heal people but they can't do anything – they're frightened and embarrassed and angry with themselves. Peter and James and John probably wonder what happened to that wonderful moment on the mountaintop – how can an experience like that just dissolve away in a few short hours? After witnessing the glory of God, how can they be expected to get involved again in the demands of everyday human misery? If I can put it like this, it's a bit like going to the cathedral for a magnificent choral evensong and being transported for a few minutes into a different realm, and then having to come down the hill and be pestered by beggars around Central station.

But isn't this exactly the essence of the Christian life? We can know the presence of God on the high mountaintops of our lives – times of worship and retreat and prayer, times of celebration. But we can know the presence of God in our day-to-day routine as well, among the crowds, in recognising the needs of others, in the acts of kindness people do for each other. Jesus responded to the pleas of the boy's father. He acted. The boy was healed. And here's the important point – the crowd were "struck with awe at the majesty of God." They hadn't been on the mountaintop, but they saw the glory of God in an act of goodness.

We don't have the choice of either seeking God's glory or doing God's works. It's not either/or but both/and. We need to encounter the presence of God in our lives, however fleetingly, to give us the power to bring healing to the fractured world around us. And if we don't use that power, the encounter is futile.

The encounter on the mountaintop was a turning point in human and cosmic history. From now on there would be no need of tabernacles or other symbols to represent God – Jesus was God himself, come among his people, and he would remain in spirit even after his bodily death. But that turning point can work through our individual lives as well. We can turn our mountaintop experiences into acts of kindness and service. We can turn our visions of God's glory into acts of healing and peacemaking and reconciliation. We can reflect the light of Christ in a dark world.

In the natural world, we can only see anything by the light it reflects. In a similar way, people who don't know God for themselves can only see him by the way we reflect him. May we always seek his glory, and reflect it in the way we live our lives.