

Sermon 6 February 2016.

2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2 and Luke 9:28-36

I used to climb mountains a lot. 15 years ago I completed the Tour de Mont Blanc – which uses high mountain passes to link France, Italy and Switzerland and then back into France. We started in Chamonix and had two glorious sunny days of hard walking. We had stopped for a long lunch on the col between France and Italy, when our walk guide (who was a geography teacher and knew how to read clouds) leapt to his feet and chivvied us onto ours. We could only see clear blue skies in every direction – he had spotted a wispy cloud which heralded a storm. We cantered down the mountain for about 5 hours, arriving in Courmayeur just as the storm broke, where we spent the next day holed up in our tents playing a strange Australian version of poker and trusting that the rising river levels wouldn't wash the campsite away.

That ability of our guide to read clouds meant that we were spared a miserable and dangerous descent.

Clouds have a particular meaning in the Bible. In Exodus the glory of God appeared in a cloud. It led the Israelites along the way, never leaving them, always leading them, showing that God was with them. Whenever Moses entered the tent of the meeting, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent, the Lord would speak to Moses and when the people saw the pillar they would bow down. When God made a covenant with Moses on Mount Sinai, He spoke from within a cloud. And Luke, together with Matthew and Mark, records the disciples being fearful of the cloud on the mountain top.

The story of what we know as the transfiguration comes straight after a conversation Jesus had with his disciples where he had asked who they thought he was. Peter had replied: 'The Messiah of God'. Jesus had then told them of the future fate of the Messiah – to undergo great suffering, to be killed and to be raised on the third day. Fast forward 8 days and Jesus takes Peter, John and James with him up the mountain to pray. Whilst he is praying his face and clothing are changed, becoming full of light, dazzling white, and he is joined by two men. These, the disciples, despite being groggy with sleep (perhaps they weren't as diligent or proficient as Jesus at prayer) identify as Moses and Elijah. It is thought that Jewish custom held that Moses and Elijah would appear together at the end of time and that together they represent the law and the prophets. And we hear that they were talking about Jesus' departure – recalling the words Jesus had spoken a few days earlier to his disciples about his future.

Tom Wright draws parallels between the transfiguration and the crucifixion. He recommends we hold the two together in our minds.

'Here on a mountain, is Jesus, revealed in glory; there, on a hill outside Jerusalem is Jesus, revealed in shame. Here his clothes are shining white; there they have been stripped off, and soldiers have gambled for them. Here he is flanked by Moses and Elijah, two of Israel's greatest heroes, representing the law and the prophets; there, he is flanked by two brigands, representing the level to which Israel had sunk in rebellion against God. Here a bright cloud overshadows the scene; there darkness comes upon the land. Here Peter blurts out how wonderful it all is; there he is hiding in shame after denying he even knows Jesus. Here a voice from God himself declares that this is his wonderful son; there a pagan soldier declares, in surprise, that this really was God's son. The mountain top explains the hill top and vice versa.'

At the end of Moses' life, God promised to send a prophet just like him. Many, many years later, Moses again meets God on a mountain top and a voice from within the cloud draws attention to Jesus. He isn't just a prophet, he is God's son.

And what does God tell the three disciples? He says 'listen to him'. Listen to Jesus. We have Jesus' words recorded in the gospels. We can listen to them, we can read them, we can ponder them, we can use them as prayers, we can learn from them. How else do we know how to serve each other, how to care for each other, how to seek justice, how to nourish and build each other up, if we don't listen to Jesus?

Paul's letter to the Corinthians shows us what we can become. The glory that was concealed in a cloud now shines around us. That the Lord is the Spirit and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we can see the glory of the Lord. We can be transformed through the Spirit. When Moses descended Mount Sinai his face was shining, reflecting the glory of God, having spent so long in his presence. He didn't veil his face when it was bright, but only when the light started to fade. Paul suggests that Moses didn't want the Israelites to see the glory fading. That the longer Moses was away from God's presence, the more the glory faded, yet he wanted people to remember the brilliant light.

Paula Gooder, in 'Everyday God', says that the tradition of the Old Testament was that only a few important men, like Moses, Elijah and Isaiah, could encounter the living God and that when they did so it was away from normal existence - Moses on Mount Sinai and in the tent of the meeting; Elijah on Mount Horeb and Isaiah in the temple.

Paul likens the experience of everyone who turns to Christ, man or woman, lay or ordained, important or not, to those very few significant men. Anyone who turns to Christ will find their veil taken away and become like Moses standing in the glory of God, because we are permanently standing in the presence of God. The glory never fades. And the use of the image of the mirror enhances that. When I was a little girl, I loved going to my mother's hairdresser - he had a small room and he made it seem bigger by covering opposite walls with mirrors and so you saw yourself constantly reflected, getting smaller but never disappearing. Reflection on reflection, never fading.

We don't need to trek to high mountains, or seek out spiritual heights in order to encounter God's glory, since we can encounter it every day, in our ordinary lives. 'As we live out our lives in Christ, we reflect God's glory; as we reflect God's glory we see it reflected, and then we reflect more. So glory grows from glory into glory.'

Yet, Luke's gospel goes on to show that immediately after they came down from the mountain, they had to deal with suffering. I am always struck that so often when I have been most aware of glory growing from glory into glory, I am also most likely to stumble. That's when I need to watch my step. Hoping that the light of Christ shines within me. Yet knowing my own capacity to blot it out, with a sharp word, a thoughtless gesture, forgetting something important to someone else, allowing the status quo to continue, failing to challenge injustice and so on.

When I do, I trust, hope, pray that I can remember God's words to Peter, James and John. This is my son - listen to him. I can hear Jesus through his words. I can hear him through those who forgive me. I can follow his example. What were Jesus and the disciples doing when Jesus was transformed into a dazzling light? He was praying - they seem to be fending off sleep. And that is something I need to recommit myself to, a good pattern of prayer, though a good pattern of sleep is never a bad thing either! Prayer will be the thing I will take up this Lent. I'm looking forward to the prayer stations and walks within church and I'm looking forward to re-establishing a pattern that might enable me to better see God's light and glory. My prayer for all of us is that we will live in glory of God.

Amen

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