

Bristol Cathedral Eucharist 1 before Lent Feb 15th 2015

Mark 9.2-9 2Cor 4.3-6

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For several years now, members of the Cathedral congregation have read right through one of the Gospels from beginning to end, as part of their keeping of Lent. Some are reading through John's Gospel this year. It is an excellent thing to do. You get a much greater sense of the shape of the story, the main themes stand out more clearly, you pick up the repeating words and ideas, and you notice the pace of the narrative, the style of the language, the things you don't pick up when you read just one short excerpt as we do in church or even in a bible study group. If you were to go straight through Mark's Gospel – as I hope you might sometime (Mark's sixteen short chapters would take you an hour and a half), you'd notice how the story of Jesus' Transfiguration in Chapter 9 – about halfway through the Gospel - comes as a real surprise, almost as if it's in the wrong place. Up to this point, Jesus has been wandering around the villages of Galilee telling stories and healing people, noticed by some, ignored by most. Then on a hilltop his three closest friends have a revelation of Jesus in the fullness of divine glory. The story comes out of the blue, so unexpectedly that some scholars have suggested that it is really a resurrection story - rather like the Road to Emmaus – but which the people who wrote Mark's Gospel decided to put in the middle rather than at the end. Why would they do that? Read the Transfiguration account on its own and the mystery persists. But read the gospel right through, and it begins to make sense.

In the chapter before, after the Feeding of the 5,000, Jesus and the disciples are in a boat and they are talking about bread. The disciples get into a hopeless muddle, and Jesus gets quite cross: 'Do you still not understand? You have eyes; can you not see?' . The answer is 'No they can't'. They don't get it. They land the boat and the first thing Jesus does is to heal a blind man – unusually in two stages - the man's sight begins to come back and he says '*I can see people moving about but they look like trees*'. So Jesus touches him again '*and now he could see everything clearly*'.

The disciples' blindness is healed in stages too. In their answer to Jesus' next question: 'Who do you say I am?' they have a few groping, short-sighted guesses until Peter blurts out rather bravely 'You are the Christ, the Son of God'. Then on the mountain, the three friends, eyes open at last, are dazzled by the vision of Jesus whom they see for the first time in all his heavenly glory. The vision of Jesus Christ on the mountain-top flanked by Moses and Elijah comes as the climax to a cleverly and deliberately constructed sequence of stories about the nature of 'seeing'.

A good preacher might point out what the story says to tentative believers of all ages: 'Only if you make that clumsy lurch of faith – like Peter - will you ever really see whether Jesus is or isn't worth believing in'.

The preacher might also point out that right through human history there have been people who glimpsed what those disciples experienced on the mountain. St Paul describes it well in this morning's reading - '*God has caused his light to shine in our hearts, the light which is the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.*' There is something about Jesus of Nazareth, that fascinates and attracts people and speaks to us of God. Is it what we call his divinity? Is it what we call his humanity? And through that encounter with the source of the light, we ourselves are illuminated and in our turn we can provide light for others. I remember from my days as a choirboy a sermon where the preacher got out two luminous toys – I think such things are now considered toxic, but they were once very popular – one was shining with that eerie green light, and the other wasn't. He explained that the dull one had been kept wrapped up in a drawer. The shining one had been standing by window. By soaking up the light, it was now able to shine for a while on its own.

In the same way, through their encounter with Christ, the disciples became charged with light. In my early sermons on this passage I used to point out, rather cleverly I thought, that it may have been Jesus who was transfigured, but it was the disciples who were changed.

We are about to undertake a similar journey during the season of Lent which begins on Wednesday. It is a kind of journey from blindness to sight. A season of penitence, asking God to remove the accumulated driftwood from our eyes so that we may see ourselves and one another more clearly; and with eyes open follow Jesus toward his passion and the cross. And then in Holy Week we'll be able to look with real attention, perhaps for the first time, and see what Jesus' dying has to do with us and the world we live in. And through that attentiveness, that proximity to the source of light, we too may be irradiated by Christ's resurrection life.

St Paul tells us it's no part of being a Christian to go around with our heads in a paper bag, like Moses and his veil. You remember the story – Moses has been in the presence of God up on Mount Sinai, and he comes down shining so brightly that they put a lampshade on his head. (Or maybe it's to protect them from the disappointment of seeing the glow gradually fade away. We need our religious professionals to be holier than we are, don't we, and it can be disappointing when we discover they're not.)

Paul reminds us that our task is to shine with the glory of God that is in us. As we allow the glory of God to shine upon us *we are transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory*. 'Ever-increasing glory' – since you got up this morning, you have increased in glory. By the end of this service you'll be even more glorious. Look at the people around you; don't you think they're glowing a little more brightly than they were? We'll all need dark glasses for the final hymn.

And it's for us to help to keep one another shining. That young man three seats away from you who is just setting out on his journey of faith, or that elderly woman who knows more about love, sacrifice and the cross than I will ever know – how do we help to keep them shining? And what about the people, (there must be some here this morning) for whom the shine has almost and perhaps completely gone – people going through times of sorrow, or loneliness or loss, and who are here by the skin of their teeth and a quietly desperate hope that here, surrounded by worship and images and words and music and people, there's just a chance that that light will glimmer again.

As fellow members of the Body of Christ it is important we give one another that level of attention. If our eyes and ears are all clogged up with habitual self-centredness, we'll never see what's going on around us; we can look and look at Jesus but we won't see a thing. People will be like trees and God will remain unrecognised. A marvellous project for us all this Lent would be learning to see.

Christian faith is no simple matter. It's a subtle, complex, grown-up business, like love or truth. You have to let it draw you in. It's no wonder that it remains veiled to so many. But there are veils and veils. There is the mystery of faith itself, the mystery of God who reveals himself on a Cross – which is hard enough for people like us to enter into; and there are the veils, the obstacles, the impediments to faith that we create for others through the bags we put over our own heads: our reticence, our lack of attention, our half-heartedness, our lack of urgency, our preoccupation with less important things.

So, Shining Ones, veils off. Let God kindle the light that's inside you. Let this Eucharist nourish the flame. We prayed in today's collect: *'May we be strengthened to suffer with Christ and be changed into his likeness, from glory to glory'*. After Communion, we will pray that we may see the glory of our Holy God in the face of Jesus Christ, that we may reflect his life in word and deed. May it be so for us all this Lent. Amen