



Sermon preached by Revd Elizabeth Caswell on Sunday 14 February

Readings: Mark 9:2-9; 2 Kings 2: 1-12

This Sunday of the Church year has two possible titles: we could call it ‘the last Sunday after Epiphany’, or we could call it ‘the last Sunday before Lent’. Either way, it’s a Sunday that heralds a transition. The Light that shines, the glory of God revealed in the face of Jesus Christ, is about to do what Moses once did, in a memorable phrase from Exodus, he entered the “thick darkness where God was.” A mountain top, a cloud, a voice, the familiar motifs of divine revelation. God is already there, because where else would the light shine but in the darkness?

Wandering, at astonishing speed, around the sites of past revelation, Elijah and Elisha come to the Jordan. The story is one of transition – of the mantle laid down, and taken up; of abandonment, behind the little word ‘leave’ lies the heavier thought, ‘abandon’. “I will not abandon you” says Elisha, again and again, knowing that it is he who is about to be abandoned. But it has to happen. And as Jesus’ disciples will discover, as Jesus had promised them, what happens next is the vital next stage of their calling; not abandonment but fulfilment, God shining within them.

Peter, James and John have an epiphany, a revelation, on the mountain top. They see and hear things which God wants them to know. It’s confirmation of Peter’s cry of faith, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” It’s confirmation that Jesus will fulfil the demands and promises of Law and Prophets. And it is the call to move on, grow in their understanding of what it means to follow him. Listen to him. Prophecies of death and resurrection must be heard, not denied. Only a few weeks and they will no longer see his face. But in the abandonment, in the letting go, they will arrive at a far deeper knowing. The light they have seen in Jesus they will reflect; the Spirit who fills Jesus ‘without measure’ is coming to them, and their humanity will be transformed by God’s grace.

Of course it is only human to want the lovely bits of the story but turn away from the demanding bits. Listen, says the voice. Take those earplugs out. The glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ is the glory of a face disfigured by suffering. Isaiah 53 describes the suffering servant of the Lord, “there is no beauty that we should desire him”, he writes; despised, rejected, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; bruised for our sins. A crown of thorns will be pressed into this face; and better not ask what will happen to his back, his hands, his feet, his side...” One from whom others hide their faces.” The disciples will turn and run, in fear. Fear is hard to hide. And would we have done any better?

But love is even harder to hide. They will see the glory of the Lord, the light of holy love, again, in the crucifixion, in resurrection; beyond the empty tomb this transfigured humanity will come to them through tear-blurred eyes, and locked doors, penetrating fear and doubt, in Jerusalem and Emmaus and Galilee, and even on the road to Damascus.

Anywhere and everywhere, in an I.C.U. or on Death Row, on the mountain top or in the valley of the shadow of death, in laboratory and library, garden and chapel, kitchen and concert hall, anywhere and everywhere God’s glory may burst through. And we recognise it because we have seen it shining in the face of Jesus.

What have we seen in that face, the face which in one sense we have never ‘seen’? “Father’s pure radiance”? Yes, we have seen God with us, in action, telling us the truth, living that truth and inviting us to go on the journey of a lifetime. We have seen compassion reaching out to heal the sick, feed the hungry, embrace the ostracised. We have seen the companion who creates community with the broken bread of his own body; a community for all who are humble enough

to come – although, remember, you will never be the same again. We have seen the One who speaks uncomfortable truth, disconcerting truth, who challenges hypocrisy and injustice, yet who reaches out beyond what we are to what we could be, if only we would take off our masks and admit our need. We have seen the embodiment of God's good news, who names sin and mediates forgiveness, who is the open door into God's presence. We have seen the One who did all this at the cost of his life.

What we see in the face of Jesus Christ is God with us , and for us: the glory of love to the uttermost, grace abounding, light shining in the darkness. Anywhere, and everywhere, God's glory bursts through, and God's Spirit does new things in us and through us, God's 'being transformed' people...Are we ready?