Sermon for Last before Lent Year A

Readings: Exodus 24:12-18; Matthew 17:1-9

i

We are obviously expected to draw the parallels between Moses on Mount Sinai and Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. The similarities are easily spotted: the mountain top is a meeting place with God and both Moses and Jesus wait for 6 days before the revelation comes on the 7th (Exodus 24:16 & Matthew 17:1) because God is creating something new which changes the world in both instances.

The dissimilarities are perhaps more significant. Crucially, Jesus is not the new Moses. Moses represents the people and receives the revelation from God - in his case the 10 Commandments; in Matthew the three disciples represent the people and Jesus **is** the divine revelation.

ii

An encounter with God is the focus of each story. Moses and the disciples have a vision of God. They undergo a temporary altered state of consciousness. In one sense this is not normal when by normal we mean the fully self-aware state of mind in which most of us reside mentally for most of our waking hours, but visionary experience is absolutely normal if by that we mean states of consciousness that are commonly experienced by healthy individuals.

We are used to the altered consciousness of sleep, dream, trance, coma and many other temporary or unusual mental states, and visionary experience can be counted among that number of less frequent, but universally known mental states. How such experiences are described depends on the cultural language available.

Visionary states are found throughout the Bible, but they abound in great numbers within the NT surrounding those men and women who knew Jesus. Only in recent generations has western empiricism begun to question the possibility of such spiritual events. Modern western culture is hardly normative and should not preclude other, richer concepts of reality. Viewed through a wider cultural lens, the disciples see a vision which they can reliably relate to others. The three disciples all share the same experience and although it was alarming and confusing at the time, it later made sense when they experienced the resurrection.

Many of us will have at least had a taste of such a visionary experience. Few of us will attend church just out of habit, or because we have read the Bible, or because we wish to support a social programme run by the church. Those relatively few who still attend church today in western countries may subscribe to all those motives I have just listed, but what really keeps them coming is the spiritual experience they have had.

Most of us have not seen angels, been taken up to heaven, or spoken with the Virgin Mary, but most of us know something of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Our rational understanding has to be able to make sense of the Bible, the way in which we live as Christians has got to be consistent with the values we find in the Scriptures, but it also has to **feel** right too. Head, hands and heart all tell us that Jesus lives. It is difficult to sustain faith for long if any of those three fail us.

So we need an adult, educated theology in order to understand our faith at the same intellectual level as we understand other parts of our lives. If we have a professional understanding Monday to Friday of our employment, our faith cannot last forever if on Sunday we revert to a Sunday school level of understanding.

Likewise, our faith cannot be sustained forever if we mix with non-Christians all the time, never feed our faith through worship, fellowship and sacrament and never live out our faith in good works. The inner contradiction of our head and our hands will cripple us.

So too we could not sustain our faith forever if we did not experience that sense of God’s presence within us and around us. Some have learned through prayer, contemplation and Christian service how to strengthen such spiritual encounters; for others they are weak and easily threatened by a secular western culture that claims such encounters do not exist. But those who have known a powerful spiritual renewal, a conversion experience, or a confirming experience, such people know the sheer undeniable power and joy of such inspirational moments.

Moses, Peter, James and John experienced such moments in our readings today.

ii

Moses and the three disciples come back down off their respective mountains to people waiting for them below. They have just had life-changing spiritual experiences. Moses stayed up Sinai an extra 40 days after receiving the tablets of stone presumably in joyful thanksgiving. Peter is so ecstatic on the Mount of Transfiguration he offers to build some booths as was the custom for the Jewish festival by that name. Based on that precedent, we might assume that Peter intended to stay up a whole week to savour the moment.

In their different ways, Moses and the disciples hit reality like running into a brick wall.

Moses descends with his face aglow with rapture only to find the people have turned to worshipping a golden calf behind his back.

Peter, James and John descend to a sorry spectacle of the other disciples unable to cure the epileptic boy.

Most of us in church today are acquainted with that same brick wall. We have our life-sustaining moments of spiritual encounter with the Holy Spirit, but we have all slammed into the brutal, unyielding reality of an under-whelming Church.

I recall the story of one village congregation which had resorted to fisticuffs on the road outside the front porch shortly before I arrived in the circuit. The two factions still sat in opposite corners at the back, surveying the sea of empty pews before them. Or the church in which not a single person offered to join the minister in her new prison visiting initiative, or the church that rejected the suggestion of buying a new carpet for the Sunday school because the one they had was “only forty years old”.

If it were not for those life-giving noumenal encounters with the living God most of us would have given up by now, for the Church has an unfortunate knack of being wonderful one minute and pathetically worldly the next.

iv

Since the Church has always been prone to making a complete mess of it, and we find some examples in the NT of squabbles and crass interpretations of the faith, there must be a way of coping with the Church’s often disappointing reality, otherwise there wouldn’t still be a Church today at all.

Moses’ response is understandable, but hardly one to emulate. In his disgust over the golden calf he smashes the tablets of stone on the ground. Once he’s calmed down he has to go all the way back up Sinai and ask for a second set. He tries again hoping for better luck next time.

Jesus has a fit of anger not unlike Moses suffered: “O unbelieving and perverse generation, how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me” (Matthew 17:17).

But that is where the stories diverge. Moses has no other option but to go back for a second set of stone tablets and hope things work out better next time. Jesus, however, is able to take charge and do for the disciples what they were unable to do for themselves. Jesus cures the boy.

Jesus doesn’t just scold the ineffectual disciples and tell them to try again because maybe they’ll have better luck next time.

Jesus doesn’t run for cover, saying, “No, I’m not surprised you couldn’t help, no-one can cure these cases.”

Instead, Jesus shows them how it is done so that they will be better equipped themselves next time. And that is the way of Jesus. That is why the Church survives to this day despite all the howlers it has committed and all the painful things it has said and done over the centuries. Despite our failures, Christ comes to our aid and shows us how once more.

It is in that hope and expectation that we continue in the pilgrim way today through an age that no longer speaks the same language of the spirit as humankind before it. For without those living-enhancing spiritual encounters with God, however fleeting, we would be left to draw the same conclusions about the Church as the secularists: the Christians fool themselves in thinking there is a God and they fool themselves into thinking they still have a purpose.

Constrained within the narrow horizons of western secular materialism, we would indeed be fools to continue with Christ, in the light of the Church’s manifest shortcomings, but fortunately we are allowed to tip toe up the Mount of Transfiguration and catch a glimpse of the glory hidden from unbelieving eyes. Without such moments of transfiguration we would no longer be here.

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