Sermon for Last before Lent Year B

Readings: 2 Kings 2:1-12; 2 Corinthians 4:3-6; Mark 9:2-9

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When you see your baby born

When you see your first death

When you see your bride coming down the aisle

When you see your groom waiting at the altar

When you see your child walking into school for the first time

When you first look down from an aircraft

These are moments that stay with you forever. They imprint themselves onto our memories because they tell us a thousand things in an instant that we couldn’t begin to put into words.

We all have moments that help define and shape who we are and what we must do. Through events literally before our eyes, we glimpse the great profound beyond that calls us into becoming who we are meant to be.

We must therefore be careful about what sights we choose to see, for some sights can damage us forever. We know that people can carry scars from traumatic sights such as violent crime, terrorist atrocity or war. We also recognise the long term damage that prolonged viewing of pornography can inflict, particularly on young minds. Television has content-related warnings for a reason.

Our bible readings today are about life-changing sights.

When Elisha saw his mentor Elijah strike the waters of the Jordan he understood that Elijah and the ‘word of the Lord’ that came to prophets held the same power and divine authority as the Law of Moses when Joshua also stopped the waters of the Jordan to mark the safe entry of the Law into the Promised Land. This event would support those who later incorporated the prophetic writings alongside the Torah into the Jewish scriptures, our Old Testament. Elisha saw the nature and source of the power and authority that he was about to inherit.

The disciples who witnessed the Transfiguration were experiencing another life- changing event. They witness Jesus speaking with Elijah and Moses as a sign of their support for Jesus and what he is about to do in Jerusalem.

Peter wants to honour the moment and build three booths for each of the illustrious leaders. To revere Jesus alongside Moses and Elijah is the highest accolade, but Peter had got it wrong, there was more to come. Peter had declared Jesus to be “the Christ” – the Messiah – in Mark 8:29 – now he was to see a whole new dimension to that reality. Jesus wasn’t just the long-awaited Messiah who would set the people free, but was the Son of God.

The voice from heaven that was heard at Jesus’ baptism once again confirmed Jesus’ status. In Mark’s account of the baptism the voice says: “You are my Son…” (Mark 1:11), as if addressed to Christ alone as he embarked upon his ministry. Now in Mark 9:7 at the Transfiguration the voice declares: “This is my Son…” - apparently revealing that reality to Peter and the disciples for the first time. After the voice, Jesus stood alone; in his hands alone lay the salvation of the world.

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So what actually happened on the Mount of Transfiguration? It’s an obvious question, but the answers you are likely to hear vary widely. There are those, the majority, who take the account at face value. There are others, however, who say such things do not and cannot happen and so the story must be “symbolic”. The answer you get depends on the preconceptions you bring with your question.

What we can say for sure is that whatever they saw on the Mount of Transfiguration began to make sense to the disciples only in the light of subsequent events in Jerusalem. The veil had been pulled aside to give them a glimpse of the glory that was to crown the resurrected and ascended Jesus. We can also assume that they told and retold this story until it became part of their apostolic witness contained in our New Testament. We can also say that whatever they experienced obviously inspired them to follow Jesus unto death and to proclaim him not just the Messiah, but also the Son of God – the theological dimensions of which John explores most fully in his gospel account.

So how do we catch a glimpse of God’s glory? I have met people who claim to have seen angels (even Methodists see angels occasionally) and we all know of those historic cases of those who claim to have seen the Virgin Mary. I am unable to judge whether their claimed experiences are authentic or not, but I do not assume that any experience that I have not had myself is automatically questionable. For me the authenticity of their claim is measured by how the experience has transformed their lives. You cannot glimpse the reality of God and remain the same.

So what have I, as a run-of-the-mill Christian, seen, heard or felt that has transformed my life and kept me in the Church in such a secular age?

Well principally, I have seen, felt or heard Jesus in sacrament, bible, inner conviction of the Holy Spirit and in a number of men and women of God I have known. Time permits only the most cursory look at the nature of religious experience, but we should all examine our own stories and be able to give an account of the hope that is in us (1 Peter 3:15).

There is no single starting point; we all start the journey at different points, even if we usually pass through the same experiences at some stage of our pilgrimage. St Augustine claims in his *Confessions* that he heard an inner childlike voice saying to him: ‘Take up and read’ – whereupon he opened a bible at a passage in Romans 13:13 which converted him. Wesley, although a biblical scholar at Oxford and an ordained priest, experienced his life-changing moment when on 24 May 1738 he felt his heart ‘strangely warmed.’

Yet who can say where these two great fathers of the faith really began their journeys? Augustine was also an academic like Wesley before he became a believer. Was it the urging of a Christian friend, Simplicianus, or was it the rhetorical prowess of his fellow academic, St Ambrose, or the simple homely faithful witness of his Christian mother, St Monica who had prepared his heart to hear that voice: ‘Take up and read’?

Was it the spiritual disciplines at his mother’s knee in Epworth rectory, or his reading of Jeremy Taylor’s *Holy Living* and *Holy Dying*, or William Law’s *Christian Perfection*? Or were the shared disciplines of the Holy Club in Oxford the preparation for Wesley’s ‘strangely warmed heart’?

We cannot know; but what both Augustine’s and Wesley’s stories illustrate is that the Holy Spirit is at work in us before we recognise it. God takes the initiative; God reaches out to us. Our ‘conversion’ – whether dramatic such as can be logged by date and time and place like Wesley’s and Augustine’s – or whether as silent and incremental as leaves one wondering how or when faith first came – our ‘conversion’ is the moment we first became aware that the Holy Spirit is talking to us.

Rarely do the converted hear any voice such as Augustine, or experience heart palpitations like Wesley, or see angels standing in their suburban kitchen when they come down for breakfast as a colleague once told me, but the effect of the conversion experience can be demonstrated and attested.

Our conversion stories may be as difficult to put into words for a sceptical age as today’s Transfiguration, but all authentic conversions mean that the person is never the same again. They see things in ordinary life which they never saw before; they sense the unfathomable in the events of the world which hitherto they had but fleetingly noticed at the corner of their eye; the things of religion become the bearers of eternal life; bread and wine become the mystical gateway to communion with God; the bible turns from being a book into the Word of God.

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In the brief passage from Paul’s II Corinthians 4:3-6, we see how, despite the very varied versions and situations of Paul, Augustine and Wesley, in essence they all agree: at the heart of the mystery of faith lies an act of grace: “God…made his light to shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

Our human response to God’s gracious approach in Christ is still required for salvation.

In the preceding chapter, Paul alludes to Moses wearing a veil. This is usually interpreted to mean Moses was shielding the people from the full and overwhelming sight of God’s glory reflected in his face (Exodus 34:29-35).

Paul argues however that Moses wore the veil to hide the fact that the glory of his vision of God was fading (2 Cor 3:13) .The people of Israel still wear a veil, for they cannot see the new light shining in Jesus Christ. When a person comes to faith in Christ, only then is the veil removed (2 Cor 3:15-16).

Paul looked at what Exodus 34 actually says - that the people were afraid at first to approach Moses, but later they did approach, and only after speaking with them did Moses put on a veil (Exodus 34:33). Subsequently, whenever Moses returned from speaking with the Lord, he would address the people with his radiant face uncovered, but after speaking would put back the veil (Exodus 34:35). Paul interprets this to mean that Moses wore the veil to hide the fact that the glory of his vision of God was fading.

Clearly, Paul is trying to make the point, that unlike the fading glory of Moses’ divine encounter, when we encounter Christ we have the light of God put within us, not something that fades away. The outward circumstances of our lives may be at odds with what we have within us, making the gospel a treasure in earthen vessels (2 Cor 4:7), but the light shines on, unseen, but inward and eternal (2 Cor 4:17-18).

The question this presents to us is whether the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ is just skin deep, or whether it shines within us? Do our lives reflect another person’s faith and experience, is our faith dependent upon a particular group of friends at a particular church, does it flourish under benign conditions for believers, or would the light quickly go out in times of persecution, or if we left our circle of friends or our current church, or if our spouse died?

Is our faith only skin deep and liable to fade when our circumstances change, or do we truly have the light of Christ within us?

**Rev Dr Trevor Hoggard**

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