

Transfiguration of our Lord

Luke 9.28-36

St Luke's, Chelsea

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Imagine if today three men in walking gear appear, with shocked faces, in a pub in Keswick. "We've just come down off Helvellyn," they say, "and while we were on the top of that mountain we saw the most incredible thing. We saw Jesus." Well, you might first take a surreptitious sniff of their breath. And you might well enquire what else they were still in the process of coming down off. But even if you decided that the three were not in their right minds, or were confused by, say, an unusual weather pattern, the men might well remain convinced. "We know what we saw with our own eyes," they might insist. "We saw Jesus."

In modern day parlance, we often call that kind of event a religious experience. And in similar fashion our gospel reading tells of what we must by the same criteria call a religious experience. Peter, James and John go up the mountain, and see and hear a series of miraculous events. They themselves can barely believe what they're seeing. We can imagine the mixed reactions that the other disciples surely had when the three returned.

And it is religious experience that I want to ponder today.

It's a term that people tend to use in one of two ways. And perhaps as I describe them you'll identify one that you prefer; perhaps you'll recall in your own life moments that you would call a 'religious experience' in one of these ways.

On the one hand, I hear people speak of 'religious experience' to mean those events such as visions of the divine, or glimpses of the future, or speaking in tongues, and so on. Religious experience of this kind are events that seemingly cannot be explained by the

natural order: they are in their very nature miraculous, events that demand a supernatural, or religious, explanation.¹

The second way I hear 'religious experience' spoken of is when it's used to mean anything in someone's normal life that sublimely speaks to them of something beyond. As the well-known hymn puts it, 'When I look down from lofty mountain grandeur, / and hear the brook, / and feel the gentle breeze, / then sings my soul, / my Saviour God to thee.' That's the second way I hear people talk of religious experience. It's an encounter with things of this world that you could explain in entirely scientific terms, but which bring about in us a feeling of awe, or comfort, or peace, that we attribute to something more than our everyday worldly life.

Those are the two ways. There's quite a distance between them.

But I wonder if there is also a third way of talking about religious experience – one that doesn't appeal either to supernatural moments or to a personal sense of the sublime. To get towards it, perhaps we can ponder the two words that make up this peculiarly complex phrase.

Let's turn first to ask what we mean by 'religious'. And here we can be in somewhat critical mode. For the easy temptation is to look, as in our first set of examples, for moments that we can't explain by scientific means – the religious as the supernatural and miraculous. It's the approach very influentially taken by the Harvard psychologist William James at the start of the twentieth century, when he published his seminal work *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

But it's also a hugely problematic definition of religion. After all, no one would dispute that we're doing a whole series of religious things here right now – sitting in church, addressing prayers to God, about to engage in a ritual of sharing bread and wine that Christians have

¹ You might be hoping that in 5 minutes time I will have told you the truth about such things: what did the disciples actually see on the mountaintop; does prophecy actually happen today; and so on. Well, I'm sorry to disappoint you. I can't be alone in adopting a bit of a fudge. I haven't witnessed such wonders; I remain open to the possibility that they happen; I ponder whether my own light scepticism in part prevents me from witnessing them. But that is to describe a first way that people often speak of 'religious experience' – whether to praise it or as they shift rather uncomfortably in their pews, feeling that all of this is very un-English.

performed for two thousand years. And when you leave here you will also perform acts that we call religious – acts of forgiveness, or compassion, or love. The things we do here and outside these four walls are religious, and they're also entirely explicable in ordinary, scientific terms.

Because religion is nigh on impossible to separate from the rest of human life. Our relationship with God is one that concerns our minds and bodies – so it's hardly surprising that something can be a religious act and at the same time one that we might explain simply in terms of our thoughts and actions. It is possible that 'religious experiences' in the sense of supernatural occurrences happen – but they can't be the only, or even the most common, kind of thing we could call religious.

So we recognise that 'religious' is less a discrete portion of our lives than a disposition and motivation that colours our whole life. What then of 'experience'? I remember asking a Professor of Philosophy at Cambridge a few years ago if there was a good accessible introduction to what we mean by experience. And she looked a bit confused and responded, "But it's so complicated: you'd have real trouble doing that." And indeed the whole notion of experience is complicated – and if for a Professor of Philosophy, then certainly for us mere mortals.

But perhaps that very complexity gives us the potential to understand religious experience slightly differently. Most particularly, when we speak of religious experience, we often leap to describe something that hits us as passive observers – whether that's the vision of a dazzling white Jesus the disciples see, or the sublime awe of a great sunset. But what if we were also happy talking of religious experience in terms of those things in which we are actively involved? When I learn to act with kindness and generosity to those around me, say, I'm learning to see with the eyes of Christ. After all, God's action is not like that of another person, as if God doing something means I can't be involved; my actions can be both my own and divinely inspired. And in opening myself to the life of God in me, I'm building up my religious experience.

So I wonder if there is also a third way of talking about religious experience – one that doesn't appeal either to supernatural moments or to a personal sense of the sublime. I think, say, of John Wesley's describing his heart being 'strangely warmed' by his encounter with the Moravians in the City of London – the same Moravians who still have a chapel and cemetery near the World's End Post Office. Or I think of people I know who, in the midst of a difficult time in their lives, will say – 'In this time, I've felt something I've never felt so much before. I've felt God with me in this, holding me through it all.'

Because the experience of God is not like the experience of another person. We depend on our five senses to encounter the world around us. But God is not of this world. Whatever we sense on the surface of our senses is surely the bubbling up of something happening deep below the surface in our being. Early Christian writers liked to speak of a set of spiritual senses parallel to our created senses. Spiritual seeing was the most common metaphor. That's the transfiguration – becoming able to see the world as it really is in all its God-created glory and human fragility and mess. But they could also speak of spiritual hearing; of spiritual touch; of spiritual taste; and, most bizarrely to our ears, of spiritual smelling.

That's the level on which, dare I say it, we might be most transformed by our religious experience. It's the moment of aligning ourselves with God's purposes in the world. It's a process of learning to become alert to all that God would have us do with our lives. Of course, we might be surprised at any time. Like the disciples in the locked upper room, or Paul on the road to Damascus, we have to allow that God may come to us when we least expect it. But in the meantime, we do well to allow ourselves to build up our religious experience: to learn to smell, to savour, to feel, to listen in this world with divine sensibility. And, above all, following in the way of Peter, James and John, to let our eyes be opened to behold the transfigured truth of this world in the dazzling light of Christ.