

Sunday next before Lent, Year A

Exodus 24.12-end • Psalm 2 • 2 Peter 1.16-end • Matthew 17.1-9

19 February 2023

St Luke's, Chelsea

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I find myself wondering, sometimes, how the disciples experienced life with Jesus. We get hints of their understanding of him in some of the gospels – their confusion at times about what he was up to; their faltering perception of his true nature. And then there is what it must have been like to follow him around. All of the gospels depict Jesus as being on the move much of the time: this was a tough life on the road. And then there was surely the physic exhaustion. Just before today's gospel reading, Jesus warns his disciples that following him means taking up their cross (Matt 16.24-26). As Peter, James and John plod their way up the mountain, I wouldn't be surprised if they are not just physically tired but also living in confusion, not sure quite how to put together all that they are experiencing.

But then, all of a sudden, everything changes. Jesus is no longer the ordinary person, clad in greying robes and wiping the sweat from his brow. Suddenly, as Matthew puts it, Jesus 'was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white' (Matt 17.2). And while the disciples are still paralysed by fear and confusion, the voice of God speaks from the cloud, repeating the affirmation made at Jesus' baptism: 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!' (Matt 17.5b; cf Matt 3.17)

Jesus is transfigured. Or, as Luke puts it in his account, the disciples 'saw his glory' (Luke 9.32). And the author of the second letter of Peter turns to the same language in today's New Testament reading: with the disciples on the mountain, Jesus 'received honour and glory' from the 'Majestic Glory' (2 Pet 1.17).

Glory. It's a word that echoes around our liturgy.¹ 'Glory be to God on high', the choir sing on our behalf – and then, soon they will take up the song again: 'heaven and earth are full of thy glory'. At the end of the eucharistic prayer, we will proclaim 'Blessing and honour and glory and power'. 'For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory', we then pray. And again, we pray after communion: 'Send us out in the power of your Spirit to live and work to your praise and glory'.

What, though, is this glory of which we speak?

Certainly, we could speak of the deeply scriptural roots of our talk of glory.

We could draw out the declarations of God's glory that flow through the Old Testament.² The Hebrew word quite literally means 'weight': in a person we might speak of weightiness, influence, gravitas; in God we speak of splendour, of majesty, of power other than all human power. We hear in today's Old Testament of the 'glory of the Lord' that calls Moses into the cloud on Mount Sinai. And repeatedly elsewhere we hear of the glory of God's name; of the presence of God's glory in the fire and cloud that lead Israel through the desert, in ark of the covenant, in the temple.³ Fifty-three times the Psalms speak of the 'glory of the Lord'. What's more, the glory of God is to be seen not just in God but also in that which God has created. 'The heavens declare the glory of God', as one Psalm beautifully puts it.

And we could ponder, too, how the New Testament takes up this language of glory to speak of Jesus.⁴ How many times have you heard the word said but let your mind glide over it? 'And we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth' (John 1.14). 'Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them.' (Luke 2.9) 'The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen'

¹ And of course also the doxology we use at evensong and at the daily offices: 'Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost'.

² The following Old Testament references are drawn from Yves Simoens, 'Glory of God', in Jean-Yves Lacoste, ed, *Encyclopedia of Christian Theology*, (2005), 2: 608-9.

³ And in the striking vision of Ezekiel the divine glory overflows beyond the Temple, accompanying the people of God on their way into exile, and on their return (Ezek 10.18f; 11.22f; 43.4).

⁴ In addition to Simoens, I have drawn for these references on Alyssa Lyra Pitstick, 'Glory', in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*, (2011), 197-8.

(Luke 2.20). 'To be a light to lighten the Gentiles, and to be the glory of thy people Israel' (Luke 2.32, as translated in the BCP). All this – and Jesus isn't even yet out of his swaddling cloths!

Jesus reveals God's glory. The glory of Jesus reveals him to be God. But this is also a glory that is passed on to us who follow Christ, and beyond. 'let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven' (Matt 5.16).⁵ The dazzling white of the transfigured Christ is passed on in the light we bear, and share with others.

But, as with so much of the Bible, familiarity can be our enemy. It is, all too easy, as C.S. Lewis put it, to come to see glory as either fame, or as some sort of 'luminosity', entry into a realm of 'palms, crowns, white robes, [and] thrones'. The first hardly seems a Christian thing to aspire to; the second sounds, frankly, very worthy but a bit dull.⁶

So I wonder how we might talk well of glory today. For glory is something beyond the mundane. It is, to quote Sam Wells, 'A glimpse of essence in the midst of existence. A glimpse of the eternal in the midst of the temporal. A glimpse of forever in the midst of now.'⁷

Reflecting on the Transfiguration, the poet Malcolm Guite wrote the following simple lines:⁸

For that one moment, 'in and out of time',
On that one mountain where all moments meet,
The daily veil that covers the sublime
In darkling glass fell dazzled at his feet.
There were no angels full of eyes and wings
Just living glory full of truth and grace.
The Love that dances at the heart of things
Shone out upon us from a human face
And to that light the light in us leaped up,

⁵ Cf also John 17.22

⁶ C.S. Lewis, 'The Weight of Glory', 1941.

⁷ Sam Wells, 2020 Heartedge sermon preparation workshop (online).

⁸ Malcolm Guite, 'Transfiguration', in *Sounding the Seasons*, (Canterbury Press, 2012).

We felt it quicken somewhere deep within,
A sudden blaze of long-extinguished hope
Trembled and tingled through the tender skin.
Nor can this blackened sky, this darkened scar
Eclipse that glimpse of how things really are.

On Mount Sinai, Peter, James and John caught more than a glimpse of the glory of Jesus. That glimpse surely sustained them through the dark days of Jesus's passion, and then as they too took up their cross to proclaim the truth of Christ crucified, risen, ascended, glorified.

Today, we may see glory in the peaceful beauty of creation. But remember – we glory in the one whose journey to the cross we soon start to trace. 'The hour [will shortly] come for the Son of Man to be glorified' (Jn 12.23). We see the glory of God also in the self-sacrificial love of Christ. Can we, too, train our eyes to see the glory of God in the love we have known; in the forgiveness we have received; in the ways we have known our own vulnerabilities and wounds to be held, even healed? In our tender, frail skins, look to that truth; for nothing can eclipse that glimpse of how things really are.