

**Sunday next before Lent, Year B**

**Psalm 50.1-6 • 2 Corinthians 4.3-6 • Mark 9.2-9**

**11 February 2024**

**Christ Church, Chelsea**

**Sam Hole**

I remember the sight all too well. The afternoon before I had been sat in a Cambridge library, staring at a book and feeling a bit glum about life. Then the idea came to me, and a quick bit of timetable-checking later, I was on the night coach out of Victoria to the Scottish highlands. (I was a student after all and the coach was very cheap – though the journey is perhaps best summed up by the moment when, as we queued in the traffic around Hyde Park Corner, the Glaswegian driver came on the tannoy and announced – ‘would ye watch this’ – and set off a siren fitted to the coach, sending the traffic in front of us scattering and opening the path for us to go merrily on our way.)

Needless to say, nothing about the coach journey had the quality of transfiguration – though I imagine Peter and James and John, on reaching the top of the mountain, felt not too dissimilar to how I did as I stumbled off the coach in Aviemore early the next morning.

But before long I was setting off up into the beautiful Cairngorms. And, later that morning, as I reached the top of a high ridge I watched as the scenery opened out in front of me, layer upon layer of hills gradually becoming visible in the distance. And as I reached the very top of the ridge – there was the sight that sticks in my mind. Out below me, on the closest nearby hill but a good half mile away – a large herd of deer sprinting away from the stranger they’d seen approaching long before I became aware of them. Bounding through the grass and the purple heather. You could have stuck the word ‘freedom’ below the image and sold it as a motivational poster. No longer was I watching the walls of the library close in on me. Here

was the great expanse of God's creation, and here were God's creatures making the most of it.

I'm sure I'm not alone in being confronted by those moments when the beauty of the world seems to explode in on me. If one memory is coming to your mind right now, perhaps it was on a mountain – maybe in Scotland, maybe on the slopes near Val d'Isere. Or perhaps it might have been on a sandy beach. Or we can just as much have those moments in Battersea Park right now, watching the snowdrops slowly rise up, the first markers of the life that will come to be in 2024. And finding that beauty in the natural world isn't just a thing for us living in the wake of William Wordsworth and the other Romantics. 'The heavens declare the glory of God', opines one Psalm.

This is something of the experience that I imagine Peter and James and John must have had in their mountaintop moment. Look once, and there is Jesus standing before them, as much flesh and blood as any of them. But – flash – look again, and here is Jesus in 'dazzling white' (with the line that seems straight out of a 1970s washing powder advert, 'such as no one on earth could bleach them'). Beside Jesus are Moses and Elijah, the great teacher of the law and the great prophet. And then from heaven comes the voice: 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!'

If Peter and James and John were later on using social media-speak to describe it, they might well have said 'It was a beautiful moment'. But of course, 'beauty' barely captures the scene. In Durham Cathedral there's a modern window of the Transfiguration scene.<sup>1</sup> In the centre of the mostly orange-brown window is Jesus, in a vertical spray of white glass. And the choice of colours by the artist, Tom Denny, is very deliberate. For when the sun shines through that

---

<sup>1</sup> On this window, see Rosalind Brown's 2017 sermon for the Feast of the Transfiguration: <https://www.durhamcathedral.co.uk/worship-music/regular-services/sermon-archive/the-transfiguration-three-disciples-and-the-church-today>.

south-facing window (and after a few visits to my soon-to-be city of work I can assure you that the sun does indeed still shine north of Watford Gap) – when the sun shines, the white glass is no longer white. Instead, it is dazzling – the sunlight refracting off the white material so that the figures in the window disappear. All you can see is light.

Talk of ‘beauty’ doesn’t do it. Even the talk of our Psalm today about God’s appearance ‘in perfect beauty’ might seem a bit too static, too singular.<sup>2</sup> We might in modern terms use the words ‘stunning’, or ‘dazzling’. But for Mark the evangelist, this is a story about glory. Peter and James and John – and we in turn – behold the glory of Jesus. I’ve spoken of it in terms of the beauty of the natural world, but perhaps we should also speak in terms of the moments when we get a glimpse of God when we gaze into the eyes of someone we love – perhaps a lover, or a parent, or a friend, or a child.

These moments are a glimpse of heaven, yes, when we trust that all times will come together and we will be united again with those we have loved (just as this week at Christ Church we have remembered the first anniversary of the death of dear Fleur, who gave so much to our life here). But they are also a momentary glimpse of the divine life that fills every cell of Jesus’s body – the fullness of our humanity and the fullness of divinity come together in one person. As the poet Malcolm Guite puts it:

‘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.’<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Ps 50.2, 1662 BCP.

<sup>3</sup> Malcolm Guite, ‘Transfiguration’, in *Sounding the Seasons*, (Canterbury Press, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Here I cut the paragraph: It’s all too possible to read the apostle Paul, in our New Testament reading, speaking of the gospel being ‘veiled to those who are perishing’ as if this is some divine act of veiling – an act of predestination as to which of us lucky few will, quite literally, ‘see the light’. But it

That evening in Scotland I washed in a stream, my body exhilarated by the chill water flowing over it. And when I woke up the next morning, the cloud had come down. I had to tread my way back to the coach stop (and the welcome prize of a deep-fried haggis) by following my compass. There I was, pausing every minute to check my progress against the latest rock or stream that came looming up in the grey, waiting expectantly for the occasions when the cloud briefly lifted and I could set my course for a more distant landmark. But with the vision of the deer-filled horizon still shining in my mind, the cloud was not a frustrating encumbrance, but the plain canvas that could fix that image of glory before me.

And this, too, is our life. Remember the moments of glory, the cracks in the fabric of reality where the light gets in. Cherish them. Ponder them in your hearts. And draw on them to sustain your journey in the misty moments of life, when it's as much as you can do to keep plodding along, cairn to cairn.

And wherever we are – in the glory of the mountaintop, in the hostility of the wilderness, amidst the unpredictability of city life – may we know that Christ has trodden that path before us, and walks with us now, to guide us to the vision of the glory of the eternal and ever-loving God.

---

seems to me that the story of Christ's transfiguration wants us to look at things in a very different way. The moment of unveiling is brief. All too soon Peter and James and John are heading back down the mountain with Jesus. They head back to the mundane, holding the glimpse of glory in their mind's eye, and in their heart. '[N]ow we see through a glass, darkly'; one day, 'face to face'. (1 Cor 13.12 (KJV))