

2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2

Luke 9:28-46

Introduction

I have here one of my most precious belongings. They belonged to my Grandfather and my mother gave them to me a few years ago when I was beginning to take an interest in birds. They are a wonderful instrument because they have the power to transform objects and to show me what they really look like. With the human eye a flock of birds will appear as a mass of dots. But with the binoculars I can see each individual bird in its amazing and beautiful plumage. Did you realise how beautiful a common sparrow (not so common these days) can be?

The same thing happens elsewhere. I remember the first time I looked through a microscope. A tiny speck of dust was revealed to be full of pattern and colour and interest. Things were contained in it that I had never imagined were there.

Telescopes transform the night sky into a world of awe and power. A good actor can turn an apparently insignificant line into a profound and moving statement of beauty and truth.

This must have been a little like the experience of Jesus' disciples in our Gospel reading this morning. They were suddenly confronted with an aspect of Jesus in power, beauty and majesty that they had never imagined he possessed. Their wise and loving, powerful but very human teacher was shown to them in a completely different light

The story of Jesus' transformation or transfiguration as we call it describes what seems to have been an actual event, but an event in which the deepest significance of everyday reality suddenly and overwhelmingly confronted Peter, James and John

It's easy enough, and they themselves must have known this, to dismiss such an experience as a hallucination – albeit a very strange one experienced by several people at the same time. Jewish scriptures and traditions tell us of various events like this, when the veil of ordinariness that normally prevents us from seeing the 'inside' of a situation is drawn back and a fuller reality is disclosed.

Most of us don't have experiences like this, (nor did most early Christians) but unless we allow sceptics to bully us we should be free to believe that this sort of thing really happened to some people – usually completely

2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2

Luke 9:28-46

unexpectedly. And that these people usually regard it as being hugely important and completely life changing.

I was listening to an interview with the pop singer Will Young a while ago and he was saying how, when he met famous people he became overwhelmed and usually blurted out something totally unsuitable and embarrassing. We see this happening here to Peter, dear impulsive Peter. He and James and John must have been terrified.

Peter blurts out the first thing that comes into his head. " Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters – one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." He is trying to prolong the moment and to make sense of it by hooking it into one of the Jewish festivals, The Feast of tabernacles.

The Feast of Tabernacles or Succoth is a week-long autumn harvest festival. The word Sukkoth means "booths," and refers to the temporary dwellings that Jews are commanded to live in during this holiday, just as the Jews did in the wilderness. The Feast of Tabernacles lasts for seven days. This holiday has a dual significance: historical and agricultural (just as Passover and Pentecost). Historically, it was to be kept in remembrance of the dwelling in tents in the wilderness for the forty-year period during which the children of Israel were wandering in the desert.

The sheer gaucheness and inappropriateness of Peter's comment indicate that this probably is a true event – as so many of the details of the Gospels do. If we were making a story up to make a certain point we wouldn't be likely to put in little details that show us in an unfavourable light. This would surely only happen if the event was true. In fact so firmly etched in Peter's memory that every detail is recounted.

Chapter nine of Mark's Gospel starts with these words; And Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see that the kingdom of God has come in power"

Jesus has taken them up a mountain and given them a new view of God's kingdom. In the same way that from a mountain top you can see all that lies below in a completely new light. Here on the top of Mount Hermon the three disciples saw God's kingdom in its full glory.

When we are down on the ground we can look and look and never really see.

2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2

Luke 9:28-46

The disciples are having their eyes opened, so that they can see for the first time the inner reality of God's kingdom, and the central truth

That – even though he doesn't look like what they might have expected!
– Jesus really is the Messiah.

Jesus takes the disciples up on a high mountain and like the child with a microscope the disciples were able to look for a moment into a different reality, gasp with wonder and ever afterwards see everything differently.

What was the inner reality of Jesus' work? He was continuing and completing the tasks of the great prophet Elijah and behind him, of the greatest prophet of old, Moses himself. Both of them, interestingly, had disappeared from view rather than died in the ordinary way surrounded by their families and friends; legend grew up about their being somehow spared proper death. Now they reappear with the veil of ordinariness drawn back for a moment and Jesus is with them, shining with a brilliant light. Luke tells us that they spoke about Jesus' exodus or departure in Jerusalem. His death would be the new Passover; the salvation of his people would be the new exodus. What a fascinating conversation this must have been. In the first Exodus, Moses led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt and home to the Promised Land. In the new Exodus, Jesus will lead God's people out of the slavery of sin and death and home to their promised inheritance – the new creation in which the whole world will be redeemed.

This isn't a revelation of Jesus' divinity; if it were it would make Moses and Elijah divine too which Luke isn't implying. What this is, is a sign of Jesus being entirely caught up with, bathed in the love, power and kingdom of God, so that it transforms his whole being with light, in the same way that music transforms words that are sung. This is a sign that Jesus is not just indulging in fantasies about God's kingdom, but that he is speaking and doing the truth. It's the sign that he is indeed the true prophet the Messiah

That too is what the heavenly voice was saying, Jesus is God's special, beloved Son.

Then the vision faded and they descended the mountain and made their way to Jerusalem. But they had been there, they had a glimpse of the glory of God as revealed in Jesus Christ

2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2

Luke 9:28-46

This week Lent begins; the time of preparation and reflection leading up to Easter and the events of Holy Weeks that showed once for all who Jesus is and what he had come to achieve. This is a time when we can listen to God and learn more of who he is and what he wants for us.

In our first reading St Paul says; ¹⁷ *Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.* ¹⁸ *And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate^[a] the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.*

Even when the vision faded the disciples had their eyes fixed on looking at Jesus. St Paul goes on to encourage his listeners, " *Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart.*

² *Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God.*

Let us this Lent, in our own private devotions and in our groups seek to look at Jesus and get a glimpse of the glory of God.

The day before the civil rights campaigner Martin Luther King was killed he said words of encouragement to a large crowd:

"We've got difficult days ahead. But it does not matter to me now. Because I have been to the mountain top, I won't mind. Like anyone else I would like to live a long life But I am not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And he's allowed me to go up the mountain. And I have looked over and seen the Promised Land. So I am happy tonight, I am not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord." Like Martin Luther King if we are to survive difficult times we need to have a vision of the glory of our God