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Exodus 24:12-18
Psalm 99
2 Peter 1:16-21
Matthew 17:1-9

Transfiguration: a lamp, which we keep in a dark place

The feast of Transfiguration is one that has moved around on the Christian calendar. Originally a feast of the Orthodox Church it made its way into the West in the fifteenth Century where it is celebrated on 6 August, a date not related to the structure of the liturgical year. When I was first a minister we did not keep this feast, though the readings for it usually appeared on the second Sunday of Lent. In that place it linked Jesus' fasting, and the following journey to Jerusalem, with Moses and Elijah who fasted in the desert before ascending the Holy Mountain where God communed with them. In this place the readings also showed that those who joined Christ on his journey to Jerusalem would share in his participation in the glory of God. This was a liturgical expression of texts such as Paul's: "You have died and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ, who is with God appears, then you also will appear in glory." Sharing in God's glory did not mean bypassing the cross. The Transfiguration stood as a sign of the holiness of God whose mysterious presence can only be stated symbolically. And the vision of the presence of God the Transfiguration gave was like a lamp in a dark place, a light to give us hope for the journey with Jesus to the cross.

When I was still a young minister, things changed. Our church, in keeping with many Protestant churches throughout the world, adopted a revised way of keeping liturgical time. This included accepting a Lutheran practise of placing Transfiguration at the end of Epiphany, the last Sunday before Lent. This is an effective place for this feast. The themes of light associated with Transfiguration round off the season of Epiphany and, as at Jesus' Baptism, we hear the voice, which declares he is God's Beloved Son. Cloud, light and proclamation combine to reveal that the glory of God rests on Jesus. He stands in succession with the prophets of old who fade to leave him alone. This is a peak moment; a vision of pure transcendence, which places Jesus in the highest place, but not on the basis of anything we think about him. This is the revelation of a vision in which the radiance of God' s presence exposed the divinity of Jesus, which was otherwise concealed. That God's glory falls on one of us in this way means that, although we come down from the brightness of this mountain-view to fumble our way towards Jerusalem, we do so knowing the one who is to die stands firmly in the light of God. This is our lamp shining in a dark place. This is the day that has dawned upon us. As we embark on a new journey into the desert of Lent, we glimpse a vision, which enables us to travel in this light. In this way, we stand with Peter, James and John who witnessed this event and yet had to wait for its fullness to be revealed. And we are in the same position as the Early Church, which entered into history with the mystery and wonder of the Resurrection behind it, knowing that the fullness of God's glory revealed in Jesus Christ would one day be brought to perfection, and would include all the faithful.

The bottom line about the Transfiguration is it proclaims God is "wholly other" - too radiant, terrible and deeply mysterious to be comprehended. An immeasurable distance

separates frail mortals from the divine splendour, which must not be approached lightly or carelessly and cannot be contained or controlled by us. But the marvel is that by God's own choice the divine glory is not confined to the heights of highest heaven, but comes to dwell amongst mortals. The marvel of the gospel message is that the glory of God has graced us in Jesus of Nazareth. A mortal life becomes the place through which the gift of God's presence radiates among us in a special way.

There are two points to make following this. One is that this has an impact on how we approach to worship. The other is that this makes an impact on how we understand ourselves.

What is at stake in worship is whether the church actually seeks to praise the divine splendour of God, or meets for its own enjoyment or some other form of secular silliness. In other words, whether the Church stands faithfully in the presence of God who is the object and source of its faith, or whether it is satisfied only with pleasing itself. Worship, the praise of God, is an oral activity whether in speech or song, which acknowledges the superlative quality of the one being praised. Praise does not express a yearning or a wish, and it is not the weighing of evidence. Praise is a prompt and spontaneous response to something that is given us - like the "bravos" at the end of a brilliant concert, or the "fantastic" at the sight of a great golf shot or football mark. However there is a significant difference between praising God and praising a person because God and a person are not in the same category. In praising a person we acknowledge the excellence of a fellow creature - and it is good to do that. In praising God we acknowledge joyfully, not grudgingly that we did not make ourselves, that there is a power that is not dependent on us, but rather, we depend on it. Therefore true worship is God centred. God is to be praised because of what has already been done for us, and will be done for us - that which we cannot do for ourselves. We are not the focus.

An example of how this can slip is noted in a book of prayers which advocates displaying clear plastic bags on the communion table, and then at the confession invites people to get in touch with themselves and discover where they feel some empty spaces in their lives. In the same way a friend reported that he attended a church where the Communion Table had been given a new name: the welcome table. How easily is lost the sense that God is the one who calls us to account for our expressions of love in the world, and invites us to commune at the table where our deepest hunger and thirst are met. In both these examples the change focuses on our needs, not what God has given us. Worse than that, these changes amount to us taking charge of the relationship rather than leaving ourselves open to be addressed by another. Whereas the Westminster confession said that the chief end of humanity is to glorify God and to serve God forever, the new form implies that the chief end of God is to glorify us, and to serve our purposes indefinitely. In this mode God becomes an amiable bore, and worship a memorial service to a fire that has gone out.

What renews worship? Not greater efforts to relevance! What renews worship is a fresh apprehension of the truth about God. How that is to come about cannot be prescribed, but when it occurs, it can be described. For some it will be a new experience of God's gifts, for others it will be a fresh understanding of grace already experienced. Praise of God is renewed when some aspect of God's character comes through so convincingly that it must be acknowledged gratefully and with great joy. In fact it is said one may ask whether the gospel has been heard if our feet are not freed to dance and our tongues to sing.

Everything said in relation to worship applies to our understanding of ourselves. Transfiguration contains a promise of divinization - of growing more and more into the likeness of God. It implies that what Jesus is will be shared with all who are in him. But this has to be kept in perspective: it is a gift from God, not a wish-fulfilment on our part. This is something we respond to, rather than take control of. In our day when self-indulgence is the normal ethic of life the danger in preaching that we will share God's glory is that people will too easily co-opt this for their own purposes and assume that they are gods.

The feast of Transfiguration it will have served us well if, in going up the mountain with the disciples we see the awesome mystery of God and learn the humble place we have beside God. The beauty of this date is that we are made to realise the next part of the journey is to go down the mountain, and make the challenging journey with Jesus to Jerusalem to the next hill that is marked by his Cross. For in the cross and the Transfiguration he is at the centre, suffering and transforming our life as his gift to us. We can indeed praise God, for we have been shown the place where everything of value begins.