

2 Corinthians 4:3-6
Mark 9: 2-9
Transfiguration

Sermon by Bruce Barber

2 Cor. 4: 6 'For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness", who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.'

The way we human beings communicate is something of a mystery. I don't mean the everyday words which we use to harm or heal one another. I mean those usually mundane pieces of information which - all too infrequently - come to us with the force of revelation, and which usually are the consequence of something quite unintended by the speaker. Teachers, for example, are sometimes nonplussed when a student cries 'aha' at an apparently trivial piece of information, but one which becomes the last link in the chain of a new discovery.

Something like this happened for me - a good number of years ago now - with regard to just this text. In the hope that it might be something of a revelation for you too, I need to tell you of it. It occurred on a tourist bus driving from Athens to Corinth. Some of you I know have made such a trip.

One of the things that surely strikes a tourist in Greece is the intensity of the light. It's rather like a first time traveller from Melbourne arriving at the airport in Perth at midday. Everything is very bright. So it was significant when our extremely knowledgeable guide informed us that the ancient Greeks worshipped Zeus as the god of light, especially so since I had only been aware that Zeus was the head of the pantheon.

Then a little further on, she told us that a philosopher by the name of Diogenes had been a significant influence in Corinth three centuries or so before Paul. This Diogenes, in a perverted sort of way, attempted to embody the Hellenistic ideal of self-knowledge, promoting the view that all conventional social distinctions should be disdained, only that between virtue and vice being of significance.

The essence of virtue, he proposed, is self-control, or better perhaps self-sufficiency. Surrender to any external influence was beneath human dignity. To make the point, for a time he lived in a barrel. His behaviour earned him the nickname of 'dog', the Greek word for which is 'cynic'. So his followers were called 'cynics' or 'doggies' - not, let it be clear, the forerunners of a Melbourne football team - but a term of abuse which, as we know, endures today.

The point is that Diogenes attempted in all things to get to the very heart of ‘knowing oneself’. It is clear from Paul’s letter four centuries later, that this remained the dominant concern of his Christian adversaries in Corinth. Indeed, that quest remains a modern preoccupation for a good many today.

Now, the guide had, almost certainly unknowingly, provided me with two pieces of new information - a sentence about light and a sentence about knowledge. Together they struck with revelatory force: the power of this text. Remember, Paul was writing to the Corinthians who had all this background in their bloodstream. So when he wrote ‘God who commanded the light’ - they would instantly recognise this to be a blow aimed at the very core of their cultural religion, since for the Greeks, Zeus was the god of light. What Paul is doing is deconstructing their religious world. Light is not a deity, he asserts: it is a worldly creature, such that the God of the Jews only has to utter a command for that light to banish the darkness.

But, second, if this is not confronting enough, Paul then immediately undermines the entire Hellenistic pursuit of self-knowledge, embodied in the person of Diogenes. This same God, he writes, ‘has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge - not of the self - but of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ’.

Now we know that many people don’t like Paul. Regrettable though it be, such hostility is not unknown even by those who would call themselves Christian. Such really deserve our pity! They’re not even half alive! You see, what Paul has done here, not to speak of elsewhere, is truly fantastic. In thirty words, the most decisive revolution that Western society has ever experienced has been set in motion. In one simple sentence - there are only two words of more than one syllable! - Paul draws the sting from a mythological and introverted world. In its place, he ushers in - as he says further on - a new creation. We have lived out of that inheritance ever since, not just self-confessed Christians, but a whole Christian-influenced secular society - hell bent for many years now on destroying just this legacy.

The pathos, of course, is that we have all become so accustomed to the words that Paul uses that our eyes glaze over, and our ears close, every time we hear them. They are, after all, what people expect to hear in Church. Uplifting poetry! Beautiful cadences! Enthusiastic hyperbole! But nothing more.

How wrong we are! Every word is drenched with significance. Look how Paul creeps up on the mystery. He could have written something as flat or as banal as: ‘Jesus Christ lets us see God.’ But no.

He could have written: God who commanded the light to shine out of darkness has revealed his glory in Jesus Christ. But no.

He could have written: God who commanded the light to shine out of darkness has revealed the knowledge of his glory in Jesus Christ. But no.

He could have written: God who commanded the light to shine out of darkness has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in Jesus Christ. But no.

He actually wrote: God who commanded the light to shine out of darkness has shone in our hearts to give the LIGHT of the KNOWLEDGE of the GLORY of God in the FACE of Jesus Christ.

Like the Corinthians to whom Paul is writing, we all fall foul of massive oversimplifications. In other words, everybody needs a good dose of Paul and then things would be a lot healthier all round! Modesty of claim, utter realism, sensitivity to truth - all these Paul possesses in spades, unlike both contemporary supporters, as well as detractors, who forever trample the fragile mystery under our wooden, clumsy, unimaginative boots.

The fact is: Paul, like his Lord, was transfigured. That's what light does for all of us. It transfigures the world. You don't - in fact you can't - look at the sun. That's not what the sun is for. The sun is there to light up the world. To enable us to see things as they are for the very first time. Paul is transfigured, according to Luke, on the Damascus road, such that only a change of name from Saul to Paul will suffice. Suddenly a light from heaven flashes around him and, blinded, he falls to the ground. Initially light blinds, but only that we might truly see. The light that blinds him is the resurrection light of the one he had been persecuting. So it was for Paul, as for us, post-resurrection light. That is to say, it was, and is, nothing more than the light reflected from that face which would-be disciples need more than life itself.

It should not surprise us then that the gospel this morning also witnesses to the power of that light, in marked contrast to the surrounding darkness. It's not for nothing that Mark places Jesus' transfiguration following Peter's dismal so-called confession at Caesarea Philippi, where he is shown to have an outwardly correct theology but is still in the dark as to its meaning. The darkness of apparent orthodoxy masquerading as light. We know how that can happen.

But today Peter has accomplices. Together with James and John, the three are covered in confusion as good as darkness in the presence of the light. Confronted by the richness of the tradition in the representative figures of Elijah and Moses as witness to the Light of the world, all Peter can think to do is to build a monument to past realities. We know about that too. Light can make one terrifyingly speechless, so any action will do to eclipse embarrassment.

That is why it is such good news to hear Paul today. Having been blinded - gutted would be more accurate - by resurrection light, he can safely be trusted to know why it is that light, and knowledge, and glory can never be separated. But even more must he write to Corinthian Christians - and by extension to us - the liberating news that the light we so relentlessly seek must be found somewhere else than in the unreliable reaches of our much vaunted self-knowledge:

For it is the God who said: 'Let light shine out of darkness' who has shone in our hearts to give the light, of the knowledge, of the glory of God, in the face of Jesus Christ'.

Who would want to miss such a transfiguration?