

Exodus 34:29-35  
2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2  
Luke 9:28-36

Sermon by Martin Wright

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We began this morning by singing “Immortal, invisible, God only wise, in light inaccessible, hid from our eyes”. Now it’s an old favourite, of course, and I enjoy belting it out as much as anyone else. But how different from this is the God who meets us on the mountaintop in today’s gospel! This “immortal” God is about to die. This “invisible” God has been living among us as a human being, eating, drinking, talking for all to see. This God who is shrouded “in light inaccessible, hid from our eyes”, shines forth in all that heavenly splendour, right in his disciples’ faces!

It is a confusing story, to be sure. God *ought* to be immortal, invisible, unresting, unwanting, unchanging, and all the rest—or so we might feel. But today’s is one of the many gospel stories that makes us stop and reconsider, Just what sort of God is this, that we are dealing with in Jesus Christ?

The church has traditionally celebrated the feast of the Transfiguration later in the year, August 6<sup>th</sup> to be precise. But we and many other churches celebrate it here, on the very cusp of Lent, for good reason. This event occurs in Jesus’ life just at the moment when he sets his face to go to Jerusalem—just as he begins to predict his passion and death. The shadow of the cross is already over Jesus, even as he shines before his disciples in all the light of heaven.

It makes no sense! The story is, in many respects, more like the resurrection narratives we read at the *end* of the gospel. So much so that some scholars want to dismiss the story, virtually, by saying “It *really* happened after the cross, but the gospel writers put it back in the middle of the text for some theological reason”. This, of course, is a cop-out of the worst kind. The Jesus who is transfigured on the mountaintop is, after all, the same Christ who was with the Father and the Spirit at the moment of creation, and who will be with them when all things are ultimately brought to their fulfilment. The same Lord who says, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End”. In this moment, the disciples and we along with them have a glimpse of *just who* this man really is, that we have been following (perhaps somewhat blindly) for the last 9½ chapters.

When Paul wrote to the Corinthians about the veil that was over Moses’ face when he read the law to the Israelites, he wasn’t having a go at Moses. He wasn’t even having a go at the Jews, although it may seem so. In fact he was having a go at those Christians—or pseudo-Christians—in the Corinthian congregation who thought that the coming of Jesus Christ had not really changed anything.

For in the old times, whenever the glory of God came close to his people, they had to draw up some sort of veil—it was a splendour too bright to behold. Who can look on

the face of God, or even its dim reflection in Moses' face, and live? It was too confronting to look God in the face, and a veil was necessary for the Israelites' own protection.

And so throughout the history of Israel, Paul tells us, this veil was always there—there was always something to interpose between the fullness of God's glory, and our experience of it. If we are honest, we have to admit this is true of the church as well as the Israelites. When we read the scriptures, surely there's something of that veil over our own minds too? For all our properly Christian interpretation, how often do we read, not to be transformed, to be made into a new creation, but to confirm what we think we already know? How often do we order our lives, as Christians and the church, in a way that is not *too* disturbing to the comfortable way we all like to live? How often do we reflect the glory of God to others in a dimmed and toned down way, so as not to cause *too* much offence, not to be *too* confronting to the culture we live in? We all wear veils sometimes.

But in Jesus Christ—and this is Paul's point—the veil is taken away, once and for all. He is the image of the invisible God—God's "apocalypse" or "revelation" (two old words, Greek and Latin, that just mean "unveiling")—Jesus Christ is the "unveiling" of God. In him we see God face to face, and we cannot be unchanged by the encounter.

Surely this is just what is happening on the mountaintop. Jesus is not changed into a different person. Rather, the veil is lifted for a moment, and the disciples briefly see him in all his glory—in the company of the saints of Israel, being addressed by the Father and embraced in the cloud of the Holy Spirit, shining in the same light that lit up Moses' face all those hundreds of years ago, in that same transfigured, incorruptible body that will be his when he is raised from the dead. For this fleeting moment, a window is opened into eternity. The disciples see the God of Jesus Christ, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as that God always was and always will be. So that the fourth evangelist would later write, "We have seen his glory".

Of course the disciples are not left unchanged by this. Paul insists that we cannot gaze on the face of God without being transformed into the same image, from one degree of glory to another. God's glory, like his fate, is catching. The disciples will share Jesus' fate, his most ungodly journey from the mountain down to the dunghill of Calvary where he will meet his death. They will share his persecution and death; they will share his resurrection, too.

Peter may not have known what he was saying, but at least one thing he did get right. "It is good, Lord, that we are here." It *was* good that the disciples were there to see the face of God, and to become more and more like Christ themselves. Just as it is good for us to be here today, gathered in this place, to gaze on the unveiled glory of God—for make no mistake, it is no less than that which meets us here in Word and Sacrament—and to be transformed in his image; to accompany Christ through all his Lenten journey, and beyond.

So at his descent into Jerusalem, at his welcome and then at his desertion by the people, at his betrayal by his closest friends, at his humiliation, torture and death, at

his descent into hell, let us have the faith to say, “It is good, Lord, that we are here with you”. And at his resurrection and glorious ascension—there too.