

**Transfiguration**  
**19/2/2012**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**2 Kings 2:1-12**

**Ps 50**

**2 Corinthians 4:3-6**

**Mark 9:2-9**

**Glory – the last things now**

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Eschatology! It's not a word that should be used in sermons. It refers to "the last things": the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. Everything in the final section of the Creed where we affirm God's power to bring to fulfilment the promised Kingdom, and all that means for this life, and the life of the world to come.

One of the first books I read about eschatology was titled: "The Last Things Now". The connection it made was very helpful. The last things don't belong solely to the future: they include the present and the past. In Mark Chapter 1, Jesus came proclaiming: "the time is fulfilled, the Kingdom of God has come near". Our belief is that in everything connected with Jesus' life and death God's promised future reached us. It continues to affect us because people of faith have already begun to live that future. Here and now they have become part of what God intends for all creation.

One writer has said that worship is sometimes like a dream in which a vision of home shines before us. Confronted as we are by the symbol-laden stories of Elijah's removal to heaven and the scene of the Transfiguration it might seem to us that we are in a dream. In some ways we can identify with the fumbling response of the disciples. At first hand, they didn't find it easier than we do to make sense of all of this. People today who are most likely to ask: "did it happen?" The question we want to ask is: "what does this story proclaim?"

Both stories point to human encounters with the glory of God [doxa/shekinah]. By definition God's glory [doxa], infinitely surpasses all forms of human glory. It is "wholly other" in such a way it eludes human comprehension. And yet we speak and sing about it and it forms the basis of our worship. In ancient understanding God's glory is always associated with powerful, illuminating light – such as is referred to in our readings today. Its magnificent brilliance is such that even Moses was not permitted to see it directly [Exodus 33:17-23]. This language gives to God an exalted place and tends to suggest there is an immeasurable distance between the holiness of God and human reality. There is truth in that. In the case of Elijah, the whirlwind accompanied by chariots and horses of fire speak of something beyond our grasp. Elijah was a mighty man of God but he could not control God's glory. The Spirit was not at his disposal. He could not guarantee it would fall on Elisha or that his departure would be visible to his successor. Everything remained in the gift and the will of God.

The priests of Israel gave an additional emphasise to the understanding of the Glory of God. They said that in the mystery of grace God chose to make a connection with us. God's glory came to "rest" on Israel, but with conditions. God's presence was always come near in a protected way, often symbolised by the presence of a cloud. In this way God's glory escaped the gaze of the sacrilegious, while remaining independent from those on whom it had come to dwell.

In Mark, when Jesus' clothes become dazzling white, it is a colour inaccessible to human beings. Divine Glory was not something anyone could create. Nor could Jesus "put it on". The proclamation is: the author of light assigned divine glory was assigned to him. What is remarkable is that, given Jesus' recent teaching, we are being shown that the place where God's glory will "rest" and "the Kingdom will come with power" [Mk 9:1] will be in Jesus' death and resurrection. Glory is not remote from life. It does not cringe from touching what is human, but embraces us fully in our life. This is something proclaimed in every Eucharist.

Some years ago scientists gathered a core sample from the floor of the ocean off South Australia where the Murray River enters the sea. From the many layers of soil deposited over thousands of years analysts believed they could understand the past better and were equally certain they would gain some predictive information about climate change and the future patterns of life possible in our region. They said the core sample was: *a postcard from the past, which shows the way to the future.*

We can think of the Transfiguration like that. A post card from the past because the imagery is only understandable if you come to grips with the history of Israel, especially as it centres on Moses and Elijah. Their roles witnessed to God's relationship with the people and held out the promise of a relationship in the future. In the Transfiguration all the symbols, mountain, cloud, fire, light and voice, are associated with the presence of God. All combine to proclaim that the glory of God rests on Jesus, who stands in succession with the prophets who fade from view to leave him alone. This is a peak moment, which places Jesus in the highest place. But in the manner of Mark's gospel it remains mysterious until Easter.

Today we have ascended to the top of this mountain. Although like Peter James and John, we come down from its brightness to fumble our way towards Jerusalem, we do so with the gift of this foreknowledge: *the fullness of God's glory has been assigned to the one of us, who is to die and rise again.* Once understood, this knowledge has transforming power and makes a huge difference to our journey from here – whether in Lent or in life. The deeper meaning of this vision is the reason why we are here. It is fundamental to understanding what it means to worship and be the Church: gospel people living by faith in the world today.

The Good News is, God's glory is not remote from us. God's glory does not turn away from all that we suffer, but chooses to journey with us and shines again on the other side of the Cross. Here is a strong message about how the power of life, pictured as transforming light, flows from the heart of God, to embrace us in the deepest dimensions of our human frailty. This light does not shine simply for us to contemplate. It shines so that others may be moved to live in the wonder it evokes.

In a world where people still long for light to resolve their struggles, where dark clouds shroud us and fears rampage, the light of Transfiguration pierces the gloom, revealing that the one who is to suffer is the holy one of God. His journey into death shows that he does not claim elitist status or tyrannical power, and he does not live by waging terror or seek to redeem the world through violence. He lives in the Peace of God.

At the end of the Transfiguration we are left with him alone: a person like us in whom there is the promise of life. We are called to listen to him, which means more than hearing. It includes moving beyond self-indulgence to enact his way in the world. When that happens the future becomes present, the Kingdom has come near. And we can praise God, because grace is at work among us once more.

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