

Transfiguration
26/2/2017

Mark the Evangelist

Exodus 24:12-18
Psalm 99
Matthew 17:1-9

This is my Beloved

“We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father;
through him all things were made...”

That’s quite a mouthful, is it not? And it is a somewhat contested mouthful. The fact that we actually have that stream of affirmations in our creed springs from controversies which crystallised in the fourth century and which have never really died down.

Today the question as to whether such statements about Jesus can make much sense is still answered in the negative as much in the church as out of it. Those outside the church, and outside any “religious” conviction, reject the notion of God to begin with, so that ascribing divine function to Jesus is simply something which *need* not be done. For many in the church, however, along with many people of other religious confessions, what is affirmed about Jesus in the creed *must* not be done. The creed goes too far, *reducing* God to one time and place; it obscures the truth of God by making God too small and obscures the truth of the world by making parts of it too big.

There is much which should be said about this but, rather than go into the kind of detail which would keep us here for most of next week, let’s come at the question of who Jesus is from the response of the disciples to the voice which is said to have addressed them in the Transfiguration episode in our gospel reading this morning. From a bright cloud a voice says, This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased, listen to him. “When the disciples heard this”, we are told, “they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear.”

Taking this as read, a question: *Why* are they afraid? The obvious answer – always the answer about which to be most suspicious – is the religious experience itself: a bright cloud that speaks to you, presumably in a booming, resounding, Monty Python kind of way, is probably something which would give anyone the shakes. But this is not a very interesting answer, not much more than that loud noises make us jump, and who’s to say that the brightness of the cloud wasn’t lightning and the voice just thunder interpreted with zealous imagination?

An alternative account of the disciples' fear, and a much more interesting one, is not *that* the cloud speaks but what it actually *says*: This is my son, the beloved, listen to him. Again, there is enough in this little snippet to keep us going for quite a while but let's narrow it down to just one suggestion: that the emphasis in this declaration falls on the first word – "*This* is my son, the beloved, listen to him". At least, the confession of the church about Jesus, such as we find in the creed, reads the emphasis on that first word.

This being the case the fear or (another translation) the amazement of the disciples is not that God has *addressed* them but that God has declared that *Jesus* is the Beloved, the one in whom the law and the prophets meet, the one who should be heard: *this* one, listen to *him*.

What is the amazing thing here? It is that God might be fully present in such a totally *unexpected* place; from the perspective of Easter, it is that God might be found in one who has been crucified. It is one thing to bump into God on a high hill, which is where God's are supposed to be; it is another thing altogether to bump into God in something as ordinary as a Jesus who not only looks just to be one of us but who, on the cross, comes to look to be much *less* than most of us: godless and discarded.

This is a problem not simply for those who do cannot recite the creed, but for many of us who can. There is not usually much fear and trembling in the church along the lines of what those mountaintop disciples felt, rare appreciation of what it means to say that God comes as close to us as he does in the Jesus who will be crucified. Ironically, this is probably because we happen to say so often that such closeness is in fact what the incarnation was all about. It is very easy for the Transfiguration, the incarnation, the cross to become "facts" about Jesus which cease to do to us what they did to those who stood on the mountaintop or watched their flocks by night or met the risen, crucified Lord for the first time.

For this reason, our creeds can sound a bit hollow even to those of us who happily recite them. This ought not to surprise us – it is the way of things that familiarity breeds indifference, even contempt. But it teaches us also the *nature* of a creed or confession of faith, which is not that (or only) that it is "objectively true", but that it has about it the character of a *prayer*. The creeds end with "Amen". Having, in the recitation, affirmed what the church has always held, we say, "Amen", "Let it be so". Let it be, by the power of the Spirit, the Lord, the *giver* of life, that we enter more fully into the reality in which *Jesus* embodies the fullness of God from God, light from light, that we might know God *as he does*.

In effect, to recite the creed is to ask that we might come to see God as those few disciples on the mountaintop did, however fleetingly.

To recite the creed *as a prayer* is to allow what it declares in fact to be strange. It is to allow the strangeness of the Transfiguration to stay strange, and not to seek to explain it away simply as fantasy or post-Easter invention or, what is just as bad, simply to believe out of piety that it happened.

The experience of those few disciples on that mountaintop was as fleeting as it was extraordinary. It was a glimpse of the "extraordinary ordinary" which Jesus embodied, the presence of God in a discard, crucified human life, the promise that nothing can come between us and a God who names even such a one as "my Beloved".

“My Beloved” is what God sees each one of us to be, through the lens of Jesus. That Jesus participates in the heart of God in the ordinariness of a human life and even in the catastrophe of the cross is the basis of our confidence that we might, too, have a share in that divine heart; and it is the basis of loving those who look like they probably don’t have such a share.

Let us, then, heed that cloudy voice: Listen to him, that we might all know ourselves to be loved by God, and love all those whom God loves.

Amen.
