

“Closer to heaven”

Reflection: Feb 23, 2020 Rev'd Ian Brown

Exodus 24: 12 – 18 & Matt. 17: 1 - 9

I'm no scientist at all. What I have is some relevant experience with photography, which is all about light. Light is a really good phenomenon to help us think about God and who Jesus is.

Light is real and we all know a bit about it. Light is helpful, it's 'normal form' contains lots of variety when we think of sunlight being refracted into the rainbow of diversity. But light is also a tough subject. It's a particular wavelength of radiation, as we saw in the chart. It's both particles, we call them photons and waves at the same time. It behaves like some other things, but there is nothing else like it in some respects and light not only illuminates, but it is a basic source of life itself. Jesus event on this mountain is described in terms of dazzling light.

Illumination and brightness are key elements of transformation. The stories of Moses on the mountain, face glowing afterwards and Jesus transfiguration are evocative, rich in bright images. But the stories are set in real places on earth – mountains in the Middle East, with real people and echoes of others. They invite an exercise of imagination towards transformation, so we spend some time reflecting on the story.

I think this is more than just another metaphor for the possibility of transformation that popular spirituality likes to focus on. The stories are much better grounded than that. All of a sudden, we find ourselves up a mountain, half way through Jesus ministry and with just a few of the inner circle of disciples. But on this trip it's not Jesus teaching that the disciples learn from, they have to see beyond words, beyond the

strange sight of a glowing, glory reflecting Jesus, to the mysterious reality that bursts through the ordinary at this moment.

God calls Moses up the mountain and he goes!! Moses packs his katmandu tent; he's up there for ten chapters of Exodus! It's a big retreat. The cloud covers Mount Sinai, the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on top of the mountain, we read.

Moses is up on the mountain face to face with God and later when he comes down he has not just the tablets of the law, he has something of the radiance of God's glory still reflecting from his face.

We all know that Christian life - even Jesus life, is not full of blinding glory and tremendous experience. Jesus carefully keeps his disciples feet on the ground and then it's down the mountain and back to the hard road to the cross. But this was an experience to act as a beacon, lighting the dark road ahead, to illuminate the way.

We mark this event each year, the Sunday before Lent begins, to do the same thing, to light the way to the hidden glory of the cross. The transfiguration points the way to the real nature of Jesus glory. And then beyond the image of light to show us the way, it's also possible that this story might be intended as the theological high point of the gospels. Biblical and other old stories often have their climax at the centre, not at the end. Perhaps the rest of the story shows where this mysterious godly transformation leads. Perhaps the mystery here is the same one that we see in Jesus cross and resurrection. Lifted up, glorified in ways that language can't express.

The voice of God, from the cloud said “this is my beloved son, listen to him.” So we come to get some direction, not to seek glory, not to spend our time looking for the

mountaintop experiences, but to learn a cross shaped discipleship for the real road of life. The light was not to stop followers in their tracks, or make them look for similar experiences, but to shine some light on the way ahead, to give direction.

Well that's the theory.

And I know this is the reason these two mountain top stories appear in the lectionary on this Sunday before Lent. But it's never that neat! Revelation of God's otherness is not something we humans cope with so well. Moses lets on nothing from his time on the mountain. Peter makes a peculiar suggestion about tents!

And the gospel only tells us that after the voice of God is heard, then Jesus goes over to Peter, James and John, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid."

It is not neat, there are not three points for a sermon. There is no conclusion drawn by the writer, just a strange warning not to tell about what happened til later. For me, this is a good reminder that faith often has no neat edges. There's experience that's sometimes very hard to comprehend!

In the astounding, revealing light up on the mountain, Peter and his friends flounder. Even in our best moments, even when we are at a peak of experience we can find it hard to know what to do. Life is like that! And Jesus sees this and says, 'Get up, don't be afraid, keep going.'

Mostly we are aware that we and our world are far from being perfect. We make mistakes, don't understand what we should, like Peter, misread what's happening around us. We feel the need for transformation. Probably we note the need for other people's transformations more often than our own, but it's real none the less. And Jesus sees this

too and says to us, 'Get up, don't be afraid, keep going.'

Others around us might seem to be having a great time or success or even spiritual growth, but it's not as easy as it seems and the evidence from our insides is often as confused as Peter's. But Jesus does notice and says to us, 'Come on, get up, don't be afraid, keep going.'

What response should we make to a God revealed like this? One clue has to be about being prepared to take a risk and get involved, but another must be simply to worship this awesome God, God whose glory comes and overshadows us too.

Because God invites us from where ever we are, on a journey of discovery. God will meet us in Jesus, notice when we have it all mixed up, help us and nourish us, bring illumination and light our way – and reveal the glory of God.

Amen.