

## Sermon for the Sunday next before Lent (3<sup>rd</sup> March 2019)

Readings:

Exodus 34:29-end

2 Corinthians 3:12 – 4:2

Luke 9:28-36 [37-43a]

If you were trying to describe the glory of God, I think you would find that words would be very inadequate. If you were here last week you might remember we had a reading from Revelation which attempted to describe God in glory in heaven. John, the writer, used precious stones, a rainbow and thunder and lightning in his description – but I'm sure we all realised that these were at best something that his vision of God was "a bit like" – not that God was actually made of precious stones! There are times when language cannot adequately describe what we have seen or what we are trying to convey – and describing the glory of God is one of them!

I tried looking up the word "glory" in the dictionary. It gave me meanings like "renown", "honour", "magnificence" and "beauty". Yes, those, either on their own or in combination, give us something of what we mean by "glory", particularly when we use the idea of glory in ordinary speech, like saying "She ran the marathon for the glory of taking part, not to win," or when we speak of "a glorious sunset." But, at least to me, and perhaps to you, even they are inadequate to really explain what we mean by "the glory of God." The glory of God defies adequate description.

In our gospel reading there is another example of trying to describe the glory of God. You'll find it on p 67 of the New Testament section of the bibles – Luke 9:28 – if you want to look. There we read that Jesus led his three closest disciples, Peter, James and John, up a mountain where his glory as Son of God was revealed to them. His face was changed, his clothes became dazzling white, he was accompanied by those two great figures from Israel's history, Moses and Elijah and eventually they were all overshadowed by a cloud – one of the traditional marks of God's glory. By the end they were terrified – as we can imagine.

I think we can sense that Luke, the writer, is struggling for words. Or rather, as Luke himself wasn't there, whoever described the event to him must have been struggling for words. Ultimately the description must have come from one of those three disciples who were there – Peter, James or John. For them it must have been overwhelming – and terrifying.

But it needed to happen. This story comes just after Jesus had asked his disciples, "Who do you think I am?" – and Peter had replied – "You are the Messiah of God." – God's anointed one, the one who was to save Israel. The disciples had actually got the message – or at least some of it. What Jesus had now to explain to them was that, as Messiah, he was going to suffer and die. He was not going to be the conquering king people – including the disciples – were expecting. Just before taking the three disciples up the mountain Jesus had started to warn them about his coming suffering and death, but they weren't finding it easy to understand. They needed something give them more confidence that, despite this very

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disturbing teaching from Jesus, not to mention his eventual death, he was indeed God's Messiah.

So, up the mountain they went. And there Jesus was revealed in glory – whatever it was like, it was to show them something of Jesus as he was and is now in heaven – as far as that was possible on earth. It was to show them that Jesus was the culmination of all that the Law demanded and that the prophets foretold – represented by Moses and Elijah. And, perhaps most important of all, God spoke to them out of the cloud saying, “This is my Son, my Chosen, listen to him!”

The disciples were told Jesus was indeed God's Son. And they were also told to listen to him – listen to what he said was going to happen to him – and not to their own preconceived ideas about what the Messiah was going to do or be like. It wasn't going to be easy for them to understand that Jesus was going to suffer and die – and as the gospel story unfolds we are repeatedly told they didn't understand whenever Jesus mentioned it. But in the end, when Jesus did die, and was raised from the dead, they must have started to piece things together. If they hadn't, the church would never have got off the ground!

But the glory of God is not, it seems, something that is only around during Jesus' earthly life or that is only seen in Jesus. If we look at our Old Testament reading – p 84 of the Old Testament section of the bibles if you want to look, Exodus 34:29, it tells us that, when Moses came down from the mountain after God had given him the Law, his face shone too.

Now, Moses, important though he was, was not God. He wasn't the Messiah, he wasn't God's Son. He was, despite all his greatness, just a mortal like you and me. But something of God's glory was passed on to Moses – and the people recognised it. Rather like the disciples in our gospel, they were terrified – so much so that Moses had to cover up his face with a veil most of the time. And, it seems, the glory stayed with him – it didn't disappear after a short time like it did in our gospel, even though Paul, in our New Testament reading, suggests that it did fade gradually – we'll look at the New Testament reading in a moment.

But there we are – Moses, a mere mortal like you and me, bore something of God's glory. And with it, something of God's authority, his power and his love. How did it happen? We are told in Exodus 34:29 that “the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God.”

Moses had been talking with God. In conversation. In God's presence. Listening to God as God gave him the Law. And that was what transferred to him something of God's glory.

And if we go back to our gospel reading, we find something very similar. In Luke 9:29 we read that “while [Jesus] was praying, the appearance of his face changed.” It seems to be something about being close to God and communicating with him that brings about this change. Like praying. Like talking with God.

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But let's now have a look at what St Paul has to say in our reading from 2 Corinthians. You'll find it on p 177 of the New Testament section of the bibles if you want to look at it – 2 Corinthians 3:12.

Paul recalls the story of Moses that we have just been thinking about. He comments that the veil is still there – he must mean for the Jewish people who had rejected Jesus; they don't see the glory or the truth. It seems that, the way Paul is thinking, it is their faces that are veiled – so that they can't see. But then he turns to those who have accepted Jesus – when one turns to the Lord, he says in v 16, the veil is removed. And then he says, in v 18, “all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.”

“All of us,” says Paul. Not just great people like Moses. All of us see the glory of the Lord. It's not the full version – he describes it as like it being reflected in a mirror – but, moreover, we are ourselves being transformed from one degree of glory to another. We might not have shining faces, but you and me, all of us, are being transformed so that we reveal something of God's glory.

And it's not an optional extra. Paul says “all of us” and he means it. It certainly wasn't just for the more pious or the more spiritual – remember, he was writing to the church in Corinth and they were far from being a model fellowship. If you read other parts of Paul's letters to them he complains about their divisions, the rather greedy way they celebrated the Eucharist and the way those that had particular gifts would show off.

And remember, it's a two-way thing. You and I see something of the glory of God – and we in turn reveal something of the glory of God. Others will, hopefully, see something of God's glory in us – but first and foremost, before that can happen, we see something of it ourselves. And it's not just a matter of seeing a shining face. God's glory is, to put it simply, everything there is about God. It's not just about his honour or his power or his magnificence – it's also about his saving grace and his love. We haven't looked at what John in his gospel has to say about God's glory – but one thing he does make clear is that God's glory is revealed in the cross.

Being aware of all this – of just how indescribably wonderful God is – is at the heart of being a Christian. And it comes about – as it did for Moses, and indeed as it did for Jesus – though spending time in God's presence, talking with him – indeed, praying.

But please don't get the idea that prayer is all about spouting words at God. If you read the chapters before our Exodus reading you'll find an account of what went on between God and Moses – and although they were having a conversation God did most of the talking! We need to spend time listening to God – or just in silence in his presence, waiting on him. But, if we do that, we will begin to glimpse something of his glory. His presence begins to become more real. and before long others may begin to see something of God's glory in us.