God’s Glory Upstairs

Bishop Jo’s sermon to the diocese of Guildford 14th February 2021

***2 Cor 4***

*3And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. 4In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. 5For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus’ sake. 6For it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness’, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.*

***Mark 9:2-9***

*Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, 3and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. 4And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. 5Then Peter said to Jesus, ‘Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.’ 6He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. 7Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!’ 8Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.*

*9 As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.*

Two friends had a day-off plan to meet up in the Lake District for some fresh air and fell-walking. They arranged to meet at a youth hostel where one was staying over and where the other would come after breakfast. Now this was a good few years back –before the days of mobile phones… The one driving duly showed up with 15mins or so to spare, full of excitement given the beautiful weather, just nice time to put on his boots. By 10 o’clock he was tapping his fingers and eager to get out walking. He wandered inside to look, even into the kitchen in case breakfast was running late. No sign of the friend. Had he misunderstood the arrangements – and got the wrong hostel? Then the worries started to set in - had the friend ever arrived last night? As the minutes ticked by frustration grew into anger at the prospect of ‘losing’ a gorgeous morning after a pre-dawn start.

It was at this point that the friend sauntered by, wearing a pair of slippers and with a cup of coffee in his hand. Imagine the scene: both speechless - the one smiling, the other aghast. All the anticipated delight at a rendez-vous evaporated as they realised what had happened... The youth hostel had an upstairs. One had been waiting for the other in a comfy sitting area upstairs that the other didn’t know existed, where it never occurred to him to look. If it wasn’t for searching out a cup of coffee it could have been like that for hours.

This story gets referenced every time these two meet up – such that variants now abound. But the basic theme doesn’t change –one is stuck downstairs, anxious and limited in his looking, while the other is luxuriating in the view upstairs, seemingly on a different plane.

I think this explains something of what the gospels call transfiguration. We’re half-way through Mark’s gospel. By this point the disciples know Jesus: they know he does plenty of amazing and wonderful things and says many beautiful and true things, but they still assume he’s basically the same as them. Then a couple of them go up a mountain with him and it’s like the veil slips and they’re invited in to a whole other world. All the time they thought there was just a downstairs and then suddenly, exhilaratingly, they discover there’s an upstairs too. Jesus is completely at home in it, even when the Father’s voice thunders from above. And more remarkably still, it seems there’s a place for them there, hanging out with the likes of Moses and Elijah. They’ve been given a glimpse of glory. It’s a glory that’s faithful to the story of Israel, a glory that has Jesus at the centre of it, a glory that has God speaking words of love, a glory that has a place for them in it, however stumbling and clumsy they are, and finally a glory in which Jesus touches them tenderly in their fear. A whole lot of glory: which they discover in a matter of seconds.

I want to ask you how this experience, this glimpse of glory, might shape us as present-day disciples of Jesus – how an experience that was transformational for Peter James and John might transform us: even (especially?) in the midst of this pandemic. How does discovery of the floor upstairs, impact those who live and breathe downstairs, who worry and isolate, who wait and tap their fingers until their turn for the vaccine?

In particular, how might the transfiguration shape our praying in the midst of this pandemic? How does that extra dimension of ‘glory’ inspire prayer to wrap around a world which has been taken hostage by a virus, to confront a tragedy that is unravelling livelihoods and childhoods, to bring light even though there’s no sign of the dawn? How might we best pray?

Do you say a resurrection prayer, one that dares to hope for a miracle whereby the God who raised Jesus from the dead restores our world so its peoples and nations are brought back from the brink and returned to full health? We long for God to act – to demonstrate once and for all the power of love, the promise of shalom, the goodness to heal, and the compassion that never ends. And so we wonder if we should be gathering our forces and finding the faith to ask God to do amazing things, each and every day, to turn tragedy into victory.

But I’m willing to bet you’ve also seen hopes dashed by those kind of prayers. It’s sobering to see the harsh realities of covid, and a part of you prefers to ask for wisdom to manage the crisis than a miracle to take it away. Even though you know our faith is founded on resurrection and it’s the miracle our world most longs for, you hesitate to offer that kind of prayer. Perhaps it seems a tad unrealistic.

And so perhaps you turn to the other conventional kind of prayer, let’s call it the prayer of incarnation calling for the Holy Spirit to be with us despite the circumstances. It recognises how Jesus was broken, desolate, alone, on the brink of death, and that this is all part of being human, all part of the deal you sign onto the day you’re born. Our bodies and minds are fragile, frail, and sometimes feeble. There’s no guarantee life will be easy, comfortable, or happy. The prayer of incarnation says, ‘God, in Jesus you shared our pain, our foolishness, and our sheer bad luck; you took on our flesh with all its fragility and weakness. Visit our world: give us patience to endure what lies ahead, hope to get through every trying day, and companions to reveal your love to those in most need.’ While the resurrection prayer expects God to do all the work, this kind of prayer stirs us into action ourselves. If we say ‘send companions to reveal your love,’ we’ve got to be wondering if there’s anyone better placed to be such a companion than we ourselves, even as we know our own powerlessness and inadequacy.

I’m painting two extremes as I describe these two kinds of prayer, but I suspect you recognise them. In many circumstances resurrection and incarnation prayers say pretty much all we want or need or ought to say. But come back with me to the mountain of transfiguration and glimpse what the disciples saw. There’s a third kind of prayer – a prayer of transfiguration. Just as in the youth hostel my friend discovered a whole reality going on that was part of his reality and affected his reality, but about which he was unaware and ignorant, so on the mountain the disciples discovered that Christ was part of a conversation with Israel and God and was dwelling in glory in a way they had no idea about and could hardly grasp - and yet set everything on a different plane.

So, hear the invitation to a third kind of prayer. ‘God, in your Son’s transfiguration we see a whole reality within and beneath and beyond what we thought we understood; in our times of bewilderment and confusion, show this world your glory, that in the midst of pandemic people may find a deeper truth to their lives than they ever knew, make firmer friends than they ever had, discover reasons for living beyond what they’d ever imagined, and be folded into your grace like never before.’

That’s a different kind of a prayer. The prayer of resurrection has a certain defiance about it – in the face of what seem to be all the known facts, it calls on God to produce the goods and turn the situation round. It has courage and hope but there’s always that fear that it has a bit of fantasy as well. The prayer of incarnation is honest and unflinching about the present and the future, but some might find it’s swathed in the tragedy. Going back to the youth hostel analogy, it’s so concerned to face the reality of being downstairs that there’s always that fear that it’s never going to grasp the glory of what lies above.

To work out the ingredients of the prayer of transfiguration, let’s go back to the reading from Mark 9. There’s glory – the glory of the Lord in the face of Jesus Christ. There’s the pattern of God’s story in Israel and the church, a story that finds its most poignant moments in the midst of suffering and exile. There’s the loving, tender, presence and heavenly voice of God the Father – a voice that for the only time in their lives, the disciples hear and understand. And there’s the extraordinary realisation that, even though all this could have gone on without them, the disciples have been caught up in the life of the Trinity, the mystery of salvation, the unfolding of God’s heart, the beauty of holiness.

Maybe that’s our real prayer for our world. Maybe that’s our real prayer for ourselves, in the midst of whatever it is that each of us wrestles with today. Not so much, ‘Fix this and take it off my desk!’ Nor even, ‘Be with me and share in my struggle.’ But something more like, ‘Make this trial and tragedy, this problem and pain, a glimpse of your glory, a window into your world, where I can see your face, glimpse the mystery, and walk with angels and saints. Bring me closer to you in this crisis than I ever have been in calmer times. Make this a moment of truth, and when I cower in fear and feel alone, touch me, raise me, and make me alive like never before.’ There’s a covid prayer, for our world, for our neighbours and for ourselves.