

14th February 2021, Sunday before Lent

St Mary's, Barnes, Sermon by Bishop Richard Harries

2 Corinthians 4, 2-6; Mark 9.2-9

There are certain words which are fundamental to our religion but which are very difficult to get a handle on. We know they are crucial but it is difficult to grasp what they actually mean. Such a word is Glory. Glory is central to today's account of the transfiguration and the epistle in which we heard the words

For 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.

I think the nearest most of us come to understanding the word glory is through nature. You are on the top of a mountain or high hill and you can see the countryside rolling out for miles and miles before you. Or you are on a cliff as the sun goes down, the sea a shimmering silver, and the horizon a blazing red. Such scenes we feel are not just beautiful, though they are that. The beauty has a majestic quality to it; it's awesome. You view it with bated breathe in silence.

In the Bible a number of figures are recorded as having a vision of God in which such feelings were aroused: Moses, Isaiah, Ezekiel and Job for example. They experienced a transcendent, majestic beauty that reduced them to silence; which is described in terms of light or fire. Normally we humans cannot cope with this reality so God is said to be in a cloud or hiding his face.

There is another no less important association of the word glory. God reveals his glory in deed, deeds which makes his true character known. In the same way that we reveal who we are in what we do, God reveals his nature, his glory, through his saving deeds -from the deliverance of the people of Israel from Egypt, their return from Babylonian captivity, from sin and death in Jesus through to the final salvation of humanity at the end time. In these God shows his purpose and reveals his glory.

So we have a conjunction of these two ideas, majestic, splendourous beauty, and deeds which disclose God's true character. Both these come together in the person of Jesus. He is the one in whom God acts to save the world from its own self-destruction; the one in whom God is definitively revealed as being totally for us and given over to our eternal well-being; the one who is irradiated with the Divine light and beauty.

This is for the most part a hidden glory. But Peter, James and John had a glimpse of Divine glory when they saw Jesus transfigured before them such that- in a rather homely touch *“his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one[a] on earth could bleach them.”* But this was a rare illumination, indeed a unique one. Although Jesus made a stir as a teacher, miracle worker and proclaimer of the Kingdom of God, his was essentially a hidden life in terms of what the world counts as regal, and he died an ignominious death as a convicted criminal. What dramatically changed the perception of his followers of course was the resurrection. His followers became convinced that Jesus lived, and lived with a new kind of life that could never die, a life that had been his from the beginning, hidden in his earthly life and ministry. In short, he is decisively the one in whom God acts, the one in whom God reveals his glory. That glory may be veiled now but at the consummation of God’s good purpose it will be seen in its full splendour, and everything else will be bathed in its light.

Glory is beauty, amazing, overwhelming, majestic beauty. But there remains a puzzle perhaps about how this understanding of Glory relates the glory disclosed in God’s saving acts. The first kind of glory we might say, is an aesthetic quality, the other a moral one. In the modern world we tend to keep the two very separate. Art for arts sake on the one hand, keeping well clear of any moral considerations. On the other hand our deeds, about which we say they can be good or bad. But deeds too, and especially character can have an aesthetic quality. We may say about someone’s action, that it was really beautiful, when they did something that was particularly sensitive or generous. Recently Jo and I saw the 2017 film ‘Breathe’, based on the true story of someone who had polio and just wanted to die, but his wife was determined that they should still have a life which they did live to the full. Their courage and determination and love was awesome and yes, beautiful. The problem is that we have lost the idea of moral and spiritual beauty. For the early church beauty, truth and goodness were all equally part of the Divine nature, and it is that sublime conjunction of beauty, truth and goodness that makes the divine glory. In this world that moral and spiritual beauty may be mostly hidden, as it was in Jesus. But we know that in the end it will be revealed in all its glory for heaven is a dimension of light and splendour.

So I come back to that text.

For 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.

That was the glory that shone before Peter, James and John on the mountain.

That text does not say we see that glory now. We don’t. It says we have the light of the knowledge of it. The eyes of our heart have been opened to it. God’s light has shone in our hearts.

When we say, as we do, “Glory to God”. Or “Glory to the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, what we are doing is recognising and responding to the Divine Glory. His is the Glory and we acknowledge and affirm this in praise.

One final point. Because God is sheer glory, there is some reflection of that around us, not just in awesome scenes from the top of mountains but everywhere in nature. As the 17th century poet Henry Vaughan remembers his youth with the words

When on some gilded cloud or flower

My gazing soul would dwell an hour,

And in those weaker glories spy

Some shadows of eternity;

But those weaker glories are not just in nature but in people. There is a poem by the Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai called ‘And that is your glory’ which ends

*I see you standing by the wide-open fridge door, revealed
from head to toe in a light from another world.*

And that is my glory.

and that is his glory.

and that is your glory.

So may the God who said “Let there be light” open the eyes of our hearts to see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ and his lesser glories in the people we meet, even on zoom, day by day.

Glory be the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit