Sunday 11 February, Sunday next before Lent

2 Kings 2: 1-12; Psalm 50: 1-6; 1 Cor 4: 3-6; Mark 9: 2-9

+ ‘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.’ (1 Cor 4: 6)

Reading today’s gospel account of the transfiguration of Christ reminded me of the depiction of this scene by the high-Renaissance Italian painter, Raphael, now in the Vatican. In Raphael’s image, the transfigured Christ dominates the whole picture. With clothes of dazzling white, he hangs suspended in a brilliantly blue sky, set against a white cloud, which also pulsates with light; his bare feet seem to be moving, as if he had just jumped off the mountain top. To his right and left, also in mid-air, are Elijah and Moses, who with dancing feet are talking to the incarnate Lord. Firmly fixed to the ground beneath them lie the three disciples whom Jesus had taken with him up the mountain: Peter, James and John. All three are shading their eyes against the brilliance of the vision and only Peter manages to look up at the sky; James and John have their eyes fixed on the ground, clearly terrified by this glimpse of the true glory of Christ.

I used to struggle with the story of the Transfiguration, not being completely sure as to the sorts of images I should try construct in my own mind, or whether I could overcome my tendency to scepticism at the possibility of such a revelation. But I vividly remember my own response when first encountering this picture. Of course, I said to myself; that is exactly what it must have been like. God can and does reveal himself to humanity in diverse ways; as St Paul put it in his letter to the Corinthians, the God who made light shine out of the darkness has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Those of us who, unlike Paul, have not ourselves experienced a vision of Christ should nonetheless be ready to open ourselves to the possibility of divine epiphany.

In the Transfiguration we encounter the glory of God made manifest to the disciples; we share their awe (and their fear) yet we also rejoice at the theophany they experienced. The words of the psalmist articulate the same joy: ‘out of Zion, perfect in beauty, God shines forth; our God comes and will not keep silent.’ (Ps 50: 2). Nor was God silent on this occasion, of course. As the cloud covered the revealed Christ in glory, the disciples heard a voice declare: ‘This is my Son, the Beloved listen to him!’ Those words recall the voice that spoke at Christ’s baptism, but with the significant difference that on the earlier occasion God spoke of his own pleasure and delight in his Son; here he charged the disciples to listen to him. At the crucial moment of the encounter, God enters into the story to uncover what human perception could not recognise.

We can have some sympathy for Peter, and his unerring capacity for getting things wrong. In the previous chapter of Mark’s gospel he had, rightly, identified Christ as the Messiah, when others had failed to do so (Mark 8: 29). Yet here his enthusiasm ran away with him when he started suggesting, almost humorously, that they should build huts for the three figures. In a modern context, we can readily imagine Peter leaping to his feet to take a selfie with Elijah.
on his smart phone – and then tweeting it from the mountain top to all his followers: 
#Elijahreturns; #Greatandterribleday.

While the words that God spoke were of greatest importance to the three disciples (who had, of course, not been witnesses to Christ’s baptism in the Jordan), everything in the central scene is visual. That’s what makes Raphael’s depiction of it so powerful. The disciples saw Christ transfigured by light, literally reflected with glory. The brightness of his clothing recalled other biblical passages, such as that in the vision of Daniel in which the Ancient One wore snowy white clothes. Or think forward to Christ’s resurrection, and the encounter of the women at the tomb with the figure whose clothing was white as snow (Mark 16: 5; Matt 28: 3). The divine glory that was here manifested in Christ was emphasised by his appearance with two of Israel’s major prophetic figures, Moses and Elijah. As our first reading reminded us, Elijah had not died but had been taken up into heaven in a whirlwind. The possibility of his return on the great and terrible day of the Lord was anticipated by the people of Israel (cf Malachi 4: 5-6); indeed, many thought he had returned in the person of John the Baptist (Matt 11: 13-14).

How are we to respond to this story, beyond marvelling that the three chosen disciples could have shared the privilege of witnessing such a remarkable scene. Should we categorise it firmly in our minds as an event that occurred in past time, an event of great theological significance (one on whose symbolic importance we should properly reflect), but something that could never be replicated in our own contemporary contexts? Can we allow ourselves to reflect on the possibility of theophanies in our own time, manifestations of the divine that do not necessarily occur on the mountain top, but in the valleys of our own mundane daily existence?

My own response to the Transfiguration was changed profoundly in 1994, when I attended the ordinations of a group of women to the priesthood, among them my friend, let’s call her Mary. Mary had served for many years as a deaconess, before being ordained deacon in 1987. She had recently become a Cathedral precentor, and in that capacity acted as liturgical deacon at the service at which she herself was priested. Afterwards, I found myself walking alone down a dimly lit passage on the north side of the Cathedral towards the reception. Coming towards me, I saw a figure dressed in alb, gold dalmatic, and stole and bathed in light; shining brilliantly in the darkness, it glided towards me, on feet that moved, but definitely – definitely – did not touch the ground. It took me a moment to realise that this was Mary, still wearing her deacon’s vestments. But this was Mary as I had never seen her; transfigured by God and filled with the Holy Spirit, she shone with the glory of God, her priesthood made concrete and manifest in my sight. I spoke, and in so doing brought her back to earth, the mandorla of light that had surrounded her was dimmed, although she still glowed with a profound inner, spiritual joy. I don’t now recall quite what I said, but I certainly told her what I had just seen, and I remember that we both wept.

That experience made me look at Raphael’s luminous depiction of the Transfiguration of Christ differently: because I recognise my own encounter with the divine revealed through my newly-priested friend in that representation of the transfigured Christ. Something about the numinous quality of the light, its ethereal brightness translates itself to my own vision.
And so, I no longer find this episode in the gospels hard to comprehend. ‘Out of Zion, perfect in beauty, God shines forth; our God comes and will not keep silence.’ God identified the incarnate Christ with his own divine majesty for the disciples on the mountain. And in our day he can, and does, manifest his glory through sights that we, too, can see and hear. ‘He has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.’ God constantly challenges our understanding of the limits of what is possible. He testifies to a different sort of reality made manifest not only in biblical times, but in our own era. We, too, may be privileged to see God’s glory.

Some of you have, I know, had similar sorts of visionary encounters to my own (and ones that involved other senses as well sight and hearing, including touch); some of you are able and willing to talk fluently and reverently about your divine epiphanies. Others may, however, now be feeling profoundly uncomfortable, particularly if I have contrived to complicate (and so spoil) a familiar gospel story with which you had previously felt perfectly secure. What if you haven’t been offered any sort of theophany of your own, if God has never revealed himself to you directly in vision or through sacrament?

We cannot ask for such revelations; they are divine gifts, to be treasured and valued precisely for being both unsought and rarely granted. We may not complain, or articulate our disappointment if we are not given the privilege of sharing in such an encounter; or, if having once been so blessed, we never enjoy something similar again. Yet the manifestation of the transfigured Christ to the three disciples not only provided the opportunity for God to speak directly to them, instructing them to listen to his teaching. It also promises us that God can, and will, make himself known to mortals through direct revelations of his ineffable glory.

As we prepare for the coming of Lent and so for Passiontide, let us open our hearts and minds to the possibility that we all might be granted glimpses of Christ’s glory in the world around us. Perhaps those encounters are more frequent than we allow; maybe, like Paul’s unbelievers, our minds are so blinded that we fail to recognise the repeated opportunities that God gives us to experience his divinity directly. Sharing in Communion is, of course, one very obvious encounter with God that is available to all of us every week. As we affirm our faith in the God whose promises we trust in the words of the Creed, let us prepare ourselves to meet him afresh in bread and wine in his Eucharistic feast. May we rise from his table transformed, filled with his grace, with our minds unveiled, ready to see and acknowledge those fresh theophanies that reveal the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, not two thousand years ago, but in our own day.