20 January 2019: Choral Matins
The Second Sunday after Epiphany
The Revd Canon Dr Edmund Newey, Sub Dean

Words from this morning’s psalm, Psalm 50: ‘Out of Sion hath God appeared in perfect beauty.’

In nomine…

It will seem perverse to take as my text this morning a verse from the psalms about the beauty of God. Our home team of vergers and flower arrangers and men from the Clerk of Works’ department, as well as the army of scaffolding contractors and organ builders, have been hard at work over the past week doing their best to keep the cathedral as well-fitted for worship as possible. They’ve done a splendid job: it’s a remarkable feat to create a fitting worship space in the midst of a building site. But it must be admitted that, contrary to the normal experience of entering this cathedral, the beauty of holiness – a refrain we associate with this season of Epiphany – is perhaps not the first phrase to spring to mind. Perhaps a Lenten verse might be more appropriate: ‘what sorrow mars thy grandeur?’; or words from the Lamentations of Jeremiah: ‘Is this the city that was called the perfection of beauty, the joy of all the earth?’ (2:15b)

And yet the glory has not departed. After the capture of the ark of the covenant of the Lord the wife of Phinehas, despairing of the future, names her new-born son Ichabod, meaning ‘the glory has departed’. But wherever we are, whatever straits we find ourselves in, the glory has not departed. Glory in the conventional sense is of course transient – ‘Fading is the worldling’s pleasure / All his boasted pomp and show’. The stock of that sort of glory rises and falls. But glory in the scriptures is not of that sort: glory, kabod in Hebrew, is the hallmark of God, encountered in worship and places of worship, be they never so plain or shrouded in scaffolding. And, for Christians, that glory is seen with supreme clarity in the face of Christ, whose light is reflected also in the faces and the lives of those whom he has redeemed: you and me.
‘O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness’, says the Epiphany hymn, citing two psalms and the first book of Chronicles (29:2, 96:9, 1 Chron 16:29). In Epiphanytide we answer this summons with the greater use of colour, light and dark, incense and holy water, all accompanied by sublime music, resounding in Milton’s ‘dim religious light’, so prevalent at this season. But the beauty of holiness is perhaps glimpsed best of all when it catches us unawares:

This struck me very forcefully on Bredon Hill in Worcestershire a few years ago. As some of you know, one of my pastimes is cross-country running. An incidental pleasure of visiting the many Christ Church parishes dotted around England is the opportunity sometimes to squeeze in a run during the trip. Four years back, after helping with interviews in the Vale of Evesham, I did just this. I was cutting things a bit fine. It was late autumn and the sun was already beginning to set as I climbed the slope from the aptly-named village of Ashton under Hill. The ridge of the hill was longer than I had remembered and just as the slope levelled out towards the summit squalls of rain started sweeping in. By the time I turned at the tower on the top of the hill to head back the daylight had almost gone, the wind had got up, and rain mixed with hail was lashing my face. The twenty minutes or so that then ensued as I descended the hill that evening have stayed with me. It was rather as if I were being progressively stripped of my senses: first to go was sight as darkness fell; then hearing as the noise of the wind and rain through my jacket hood blocked out any other sound; then touch as the cold numbed my hands and the ground under foot became increasingly slippery. It would be easy to describe the experience as surreal, but that isn’t quite right; in fact, it’s almost exactly wrong. What I felt was heightened reality: a strange merging of myself with the landscape, almost as if I had become part of it. The deprivation of those senses by which I normally orientate myself seemed to remove some of the barriers between me and the world. It’s perhaps the nearest I’ve ever got to those experiences of mystical communion with creation so wonderfully described by Thomas Traherne in his meditations: beauty perceived more clearly because perceived afresh.

The point is that restriction aids focus. And what was true in Bredon Hill is true here in Christ Church now. If you’re a regular here I recommend using this period of building work to adjust your perception of this place: perhaps seek out a new vantage point and use it to take in the beauty and wonder of this place anew. My new perch in the sanctuary has, for instance, acquainted me with the bust of Dr Pusey in the Chapel of
remembrance. I fear that I’ve scarcely looked at it before, but from where I now sit it is captivating: even the angle of the head bespeaking the holiness of the man.

Now I began by talking about glory – the hallmark of God. Glory and beauty are not the same, but they are related. Glory is God’s alone, the quality of the Creator, though it may be reflected by those of us made and re-made in his image. Beauty on the other hand is a creaturely thing: not so much a property as a relationship. It is not quite true that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but it is mutually constituted in the exchange between the beholder and the beheld. To perceive beauty our senses must be trained and the practice of worship, especially at this Epiphanytide, is a fine opportunity for that honing to take place. And if we do so the beauty we encounter can lead us into an apprehension of the glory of God, perhaps especially when that glory is met unexpectedly – beneath the scaffolding, so to speak: in the face of a stranger, in an unforeseen reconciliation or moment of understanding.

In this morning’s second reading we met Lydia, one of those first of our Christian forebears, whom we tantalising glimpse in the later pages of the Bible. Lydia is described as ‘a worshipper of God’. The phrase has a technical meaning: she is a ‘God-fearer’, a Gentile patron of Jewish worship. But the description tells us something more too: Lydia is one who has turned from idolatry, which is the worship of what is less than God. And in the passage we heard today that turning from idolatry is fulfilled in her embrace of and by Christ.

Idolatry – the worship of what is less than God – is the perennial temptation. We do it all the time when our senses – our sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell, but also our spiritual senses – get hung up on what is front of them and fail to recognise the beauty of creation and the glory of the Creator to which it points.

Icahbod – the glory has departed. At times in our lives, as individuals and as a nation, it can seem as if this is the case. The scaffolding – whether the physical poles around us here, or the invisible scaffolding currently obstructing the vision of our elected representatives and those who advise them – the scaffolding gets in the way and we feel as if the glory has gone.

But the truth is that the glory never departs. As at the beginning of creation, so now and always, God continually summons us into being. Just as creation is ex nihilo, from nothing, so is the re-creation that is our redemption in Christ. We are summoned from
the nothingness of idol and its worship to the fullness of life that is ours when we turn to
the one whose service is perfect freedom.

‘Out of Sion hath God appeared in perfect beauty.’ ‘O worship the Lord’ – and no thing
less than the Lord – ‘in the beauty of holiness’.

In nomine…