3 March 2019: Choral Eucharist

The Sunday next before Lent


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+may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Salvation.

The first time I was struck, with what felt like physical force, with the glory of God, I was 17 and at Taize. I had gone, for the first time ever, to an Orthodox service – in the tiny village church, well before breakfast – and it was full of incense and chanting and beauty. I stood and wept: not because it was beautiful, but because I could see and feel God’s presence there.

And since then I’ve felt that in different places and at different times, though not often with such force. I hope many of you have had similar experiences: experiences where beauty – of creation, or music, or poetry, or art, or even liturgy – catches you and directs your gaze up and out and towards a new vision of God.

For some artists, this is the point of art: providing a window into the life and glory of God. A poem, an anthem, a painting can all jolt us out of our easy assumption that we know how the world works – and can put us into a new universe, where God’s action is bigger and stranger and more wonderful than we can imagine.

And this is what happens to Peter, James and John – not through art or liturgy, but in a direct and astonishing experience. The way Luke tells the story deliberately draws on some traditional ideas of heaven that would have been in the disciples’ vocabulary: the dazzling whiteness, the fact that it happened on a mountain, the idea of glory and the conversation with Moses and Elijah. All those made sense.

But they also saw something new. Those things were appearing through and in and with Jesus. Jesus, whom they knew; with whom they had walked with on the roads, eaten at tables up and down Galilee; next to whom they had slept, on generous people’s floors and under less generous people’s hedges. They had thought they knew Jesus. But here, now, they see him – quite literally – in a new light.
It’s not obvious from the part of the Gospel we heard this morning, but this glimpse of glory happens in a very particular context. Eight days ago – but a mere seven verses, after Jesus had asked “who do you say that I am?” and Peter had made that great leap to “the Messiah of God”, Jesus had told his disciples that he would suffer and die. And that, to follow him, they would all have to walk the road of death.

This isn’t abstract glory. This isn’t abstract divinity. It’s Jesus, whom Peter, James and John knew so well. It’s Jesus, whom we have heard teach and preach. Jesus who heals. Who seeks out those in need. Who tells the crowds that he is anointed to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, to set the oppressed free.

It’s in this Jesus that glory is revealed. In this Jesus that we see God. And the point of this vision of glory, this glimpse into heaven, is that the glory of the Kingdom isn’t abstract – it’s bound to who Jesus is and what he does. In his life and ministry – and also in his death. The shade of the crucifixion falls starkly over the dazzling whiteness of the transfigured Jesus. If we had read the verses before this section, at the back of our minds would already be that sense of Jesus as a Messiah who would suffer. And so when Moses and Elijah mention his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem, we hear it with a weight of recognition that this is his death. The darkness and pain of the crucifixion lie alongside the transfiguration, partly to point us forward beyond crucifixion to resurrection, but also to remind us that it is IN THIS JESUS – in all that his life and ministry and death consist of – that glory is revealed.

But this revelation of glory doesn’t always come easily. Reading this event on its own, it’s easy to see it as sheer gift to Peter, James and John – and in some ways it was. But it was a gift in the context of their ongoing relationship with Jesus, travelling with him in faith and trust. And a gift in the context of Jesus’ renewed call to accompany him on the way that led to pain and death before it could reach resurrection.

Recently, Canon Foot and I spent a delightful afternoon in the British Library’s exhibition of Anglo-Saxon manuscripts. Before you start looking it up, I’m afraid the exhibition has now closed – but it was an astonishing collection of manuscripts and artefacts from the Anglo-Saxon world and beyond. Some were obviously beautiful. If you have ever seen an illuminated manuscript – carefully written in a script that took time and effort, decorated around the initial letters and in the margins with animals, leaves, patterns and colours – you will know the kind of thing I mean. Pages that illustrate a single word or phrase, that pick out letters in colours that are still vibrant after 1500 years. Or pages dyed purple, written in letters of gold.
And some were less obviously beautiful. One single-page legal document doesn’t look like much – it’s smaller than an A4 page, written clearly but without any attempt to make it look pretty, the top half a record of a king giving some land to a nobleman and the bottom half a list of legal witnesses. And yet we crowded around this for a quarter of an hour: not because it was beautiful to look at, but because it is immensely historically significant. The chance use of a particular title, and the chance survival of this particular document have changed our understanding of Anglo-Saxon history.

It didn’t look glorious. It didn’t look like anything much at all. But through knowing what we were looking at, we were enabled to see glory.

Sometimes the vision of God’s glory does come as sheer gift – like those illuminated manuscripts written in gold and silver, that surround their text with intricate decoration.

And sometimes – often, most of the time; it comes through our hard work. Of coming to church, week after week, through the dryness and the reluctance and maybe even in the face of hostility.

And this Transfiguration Sunday, just on the cusp of Lent, holds both of those together.

Just as Lent crystallises the call to be holy and to travel with Jesus – so this vision crystallises the sense of Jesus as transcendentally glorious.

Just as Lent calls us to return to God, through fasting, prayer and acts of service (as the Lent Eucharistic preface puts it), so this vision calls us to recognise how God is revealed in Jesus.

And just as this vision shows us Jesus, transfigured, glorious, set apart; it also calls us to be set apart in holiness and to work to make his glory known in the world.

I didn’t encounter God in Taize village church, that hot August morning, because of anything I had done – it was something God did for me. But it could not have happened without my own willingness to turn up. And although it was a gift, it was a gift with a purpose. God gave me that moment purely through grace; but God’s gifts of grace are given to us as part of our callings to follow. The moments where we encounter God in new and fresh ways are given to sustain and strengthen us and to call us into renewed relationship with God, who asks of us nothing less than our whole lives.

May we see the vision of Jesus in glory, as he was transfigured before Peter, James and John. As it sustained them through the rigours of their journey, through the darkness of Good Friday, may it sustain us. As it prepared them to see the glory of the resurrection – may it prepare us to see and to believe, and inspire us to respond to God’s gift and call with commitment to bring that glory into the world.