

## Transforming glory

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Sunday 14 February, 2010  
Chichester Cathedral  
Sunday next before Lent

Exodus 34.29-end  
Psalm 99  
2 Cor 3.12-4.2  
Luke 9.28-36

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Late the other evening, somewhere in the depths of Sky TV I happened on a remarkable story of transformation: in the series of programmes<sup>1</sup> called *Boys Behind Bars* Ian Wright (the former England footballer and current TV pundit) spent 12 weeks working in Portland Young Offenders Institution with a group of 22 young men sentenced for a variety of crimes. Through the setting up of a football academy the inmates were introduced to a variety of football and life skills; they began to learn self discipline, self control and self respect. And this story of transformation was (as you would expect in reality TV) a success. At the end we saw them playing a match against veteran internationals (who won 3-0), and meeting Jack Straw, the Justice Minister. The message was that by investing in such academies then there would be huge savings for the prison budget if re-offending rates are significantly reduced. A valuable transformation, indeed.

But how much more, in Paul's words (in our epistle), can we experience transformation through the glory of God and the power of Spirit? "And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit." (2 Corinthians 3.18)

We heard a wonderful paradigm of this in our Gospel reading (Luke 9.28-36).

The story of the transfiguration, where Jesus and three of his disciples climb a mountain and experience the glory of God reflects a regular pattern in Jesus' life and ministry: of **withdrawal** (on to the lake, into the hills, up a mountain), followed by **re-engagement** (back among the crowds and the pressures of everyday life). The story falls into two parts:

### 1) **On the mountain top** (withdrawal)

Jesus takes just three disciples (Peter, James and John) to the top of a mountain.

Traditionally this is Mount Tabor, but from the place of the story in the gospel narratives it is perhaps more likely to be Mount Hermon or another mountain in the north of the country; there they have an amazing experience of God:

- The Old Testament scriptures come alive (quite literally!). Moses (representing the LAW) and Elijah (representing the PROPHETS) appear before them, talking with Jesus and validating his ministry.
- Jesus is glorified.
- They hear the voice of God confirming that Jesus is his son – a realisation that they had come into just days before this event.

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<sup>1</sup> *Boys behind bars* 2010 (originally broadcast as *Football behind bars* in 2009); produced by Popkorn TV and broadcast on the Sky Real Lives channel.

We need such 'mountain top experiences' in our spiritual lives: they may come to us in many circumstances – in the reality of God's presence as we meet around the Lord's Table, the glory of a great Cathedral service (certainly William Walton's *Jubilate* did it for me at Mattins this morning!), the sense of the wider Christian fellowship at an event like *Caritas*, the peace experienced on a quiet day or retreat, the reality learnt on a pilgrimage, the encouragement of great celebrations such as Spring Harvest or at Walsingham: for us, too, the Scriptures come alive; Jesus is glorified; and God speaks to us.

Think back to such events in your own life. I recall that for me a visit to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem very early one morning brought me very immediately into the presence of God. The day before I had been in the same church, in the midst of all the hustle and bustle of countless tourists and pilgrims, and with the services of the different denominations that worship there seeming to compete with each other. Ghastly! But in the quiet of the next morning, in an almost empty church and with a just a Bible for companionship, I sat in the Greek Orthodox Chapel at the site of Calvary and read the gospel account of Jesus' crucifixion. Its reality and its immediacy hit me as never before. And this experience has stayed with me, transforming my grasp of what his death has achieved for me. For many of us such a sense of God's glory will prove to have been vital to our spiritual growth and transformation.

And then Peter (putting his foot in his mouth, as always!) blurts out 'Master, this is great! Let's stay here!'. Actually he uses the language of the Jewish festival of Succoth or Tabernacles 'Let's make three shelters - one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.' (verse 33). He is trying to make the experience permanent. He is trying to hang on to the glory. And at that moment the cloud comes down and the glory comes to an end. In Mark's account of the story it then says 'They saw Jesus only'. The experience of glory passed as it always does – but Jesus remained with them.

## 2) **Down into the valley** (re-engagement)

If you read on in Luke 9, or even more clearly in Mark 9, you will follow the three disciples as they return to the valley: reality hits them in a big way. Failure is followed by failure, followed by failure. They fail in an attempt to heal a boy possessed by an evil spirit; they fail in their own relationships; they fail in their understanding of the true nature of Jesus' mission. How they needed 'Jesus only' to be with them.

We, too, need such experiences for spiritual transformation to be grounded in reality, to be worked out in our lives. The withdrawal needs the re-engagement. The mountain top needs the valley.

But the secret is in the phrase 'They saw Jesus only'. In the valley we need to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. As we come to the season of Lent, the normal disciplines of the spiritual life can help us do this: in prayer, in bible reading, in the Eucharist, in holy living: all can enable us to see Jesus only.

May I encourage you to take this route into the TRANSFORMING GLORY: spending time with God on the mountain top, and then seeing Jesus only in the valley? For that way lies true freedom:

*'Where is the spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.'* (2 Corinthians 3.17)