
A Glimpse of Glory

Luke 9.28-36

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on February 14, 2010 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

When I was first a pastor, nearly 20 years ago, I was an associate at a remarkable church that was both catholic and evangelical at the same time. It was in a working-class neighborhood, and the most memorable thing was the way people made the regular Sunday worship part of their lives and their regular lives part of their Sunday worship. One man in the congregation was a bus driver. Like many in the congregation he was an ardent fan of the Newcastle United soccer team. Unlike his fellow fans, however, he was the only one who took his loyalty to the point of wearing the team shirt to Sunday worship. You could see its black and white stripes through the alb he wore to carry the cross up the aisle.

I asked him once “What’s your favorite part of the worship service?” He said he loved it when we used incense – which in fact we did only 3 or 4 times a year. He was the one who got to swing the silver thurible and fill the church with fragrant smoke. I asked him why he liked it so much. “Well, it’s the glory, innit?” he said. “You feel like you’re surrounded by God.” I asked whether he ever felt that sensation any other time during the week. He said sometimes, standing on the terraces watching Newcastle United, he felt that glory in the excitement of the action and the song and sheer physical mass of the crowd around him. (This is a man who hadn’t even heard of, let alone seen, Cameron Indoor Stadium.) Then I asked him, “What does all this tell you about God?” And he replied, “It tells me God is always about to surround me like a cloud of smoke.”

God is always about to surround me like a cloud of smoke. I’ve never forgotten that. That’s about the best definition of holiness I’ve ever heard. God is always about to surround me like a cloud of smoke, so that I can see nothing, taste nothing, smell nothing, hear nothing, feel nothing but God. That’s glory. That’s glory, when you’re so overwhelmed by the sight and sound and presence of God that you can feel yourself being changed from the inside out. That’s what’s going on when Jesus takes Peter, James and John up a mountain. I want to look at what this glimpse of glory tells us about *God* in the face of Jesus, and what it tells us about *us* in the face of the disciples.

When Jesus is transfigured and his face and clothes are dazzlingly bright, he has beside him Moses and Elijah. It’s like the Old Testament has come to life, and Jesus is the living embodiment of the law and the living fulfillment of the prophets. This tells us that we don’t know what glory is without Israel. In fact we don’t know who Jesus is without Israel. Having Moses and Elijah there shows us what Jesus is. Jesus is the covenant between God and his people turned into flesh and blood. That’s what having Moses there means. God gave Moses the law, God appeared to Moses, the law was carried around in a case called the ark of the covenant and enshrined in the Jerusalem temple, all of which represented God’s covenant with Israel. But now Jesus is that covenant in flesh and blood.

And every time Israel broke the covenant and turned its back on God, God sent prophets to remind Israel what it meant to love and be loved. That’s what Elijah was all about. In the middle of this precious conversation between Jesus, Moses and Elijah, we have the important little word “exodus,” translated as “departure.” But exodus of course means the pivotal moment in Israel’s history, when God liberated Israel from slavery. Moses’ law and Elijah’s prophecy were both fundamentally about Israel keeping the freedom it had been given by God. So glory, for Jesus, means staying close to Israel.

Glory also means staying close to the Father. The transfiguration happens during a time of prayer. You could say transfiguration is what we are always hoping will happen when we sit down to pray. Jesus has the experience my bus driver friend described as glory. A cloud came and overshadowed him and said “This is my chosen Son: listen to him!” What is taking place is a glimpse of the inner life of the Holy Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It’s like for a moment Peter, James and John get to tune in to a conference call between the three persons of the Trinity. Glory, for Jesus, means staying close to his Father. Jesus is the way the Father has chosen to make his glory known.

Glory also means staying close to his mission. Don't forget what Jesus, Moses and Elijah are talking about. They're talking about the fact that Jesus is going to Jerusalem to die. Glory isn't about some kind of mystical escape, some kind of magic carpet experience that takes us floating above the rainbows and dancing with the stars. Glory is precisely facing the reality of suffering, especially suffering willingly taken on for the sake of truth and justice and faith, and allowing the cloud to come around you and others to see God in you.

Glory is the word we use when *you* feel only pain but others *through* you yet see hope. Glory is the word we use when *you* feel isolation and loneliness but others *through* you yet see a great cloud of witnesses. Glory is the word we use when *you* feel failure and humiliation but others *through* you yet see beauty and goodness. Glory is the word we use when *you* feel foolishness but others *through* you yet see Jesus.

And if glory for Jesus means staying close to Israel, staying close to the Father, and staying close to suffering, then it also, mysteriously, means staying close to the church. I say mysteriously because sometimes the church can be so stupid, so clumsy, so small-minded, so inglorious. Peter makes a mindless suggestion to build three little huts, as if to say, "Jesus, I see you're having your old mates over, how 'bout we make you three guys comfortable so you can put your feet up and have a proper chat, or maybe get a few beers in and rent a movie..." Sometimes you really wonder how Jesus ever had the patience for his followers. Sometimes you wonder how he *still* has the patience for his followers. And yet here at his moment of glory, he wants Peter, James and John there. God wants us to be part of his glory. That's the truth at the heart of our salvation. We can never understand it or make sense of it. But we must never forget it, because it's the bit of good news that leads to all the others.

So that's what glory means to Jesus. Israel, the father, suffering and the church. You want some glory? You want to be close to Jesus? That's where to go looking. Look in the scriptures, look into the life of the Trinity, look into the passion of those who suffer, look among the church. And what else do we learn in this story? We've looked at *God* in the face of *Jesus*; now what about *us* in the face of the *disciples*?

For the disciples, glory is something outside themselves, that they see and hear and touch. Glory isn't something they can do. Glory is something that belongs to God and is shown in Jesus. It can't ever be a possession or an attribute of the disciples. It's as if the gospel-writer Luke is so keen to make this point he doesn't care how ridiculous he makes the disciples look. They're present at one of the most dramatic moments in the history of the world and Luke says they were "weighed down with sleep." The point is, the transfiguration is not something the disciples could bring about by their own efforts. It came about in spite of their pathetic failures. Their sleepy humanity couldn't prevent the revelation of Jesus' dazzling divinity. And we've already noted how silly Peter looks when he tries to build three huts for Jesus and his companions. But Luke's point is the same. Jesus' glory is not something that can be contained or commodified or controlled. We can't contain Jesus' glory in a building, even a structure as large and beautiful as the one we're in right now, and we can't control Jesus' appearing or who he appears to or when. God's glory is beyond us. That's what the faltering and feeble reactions of the disciples are telling us.

And then at the end of the story we discover the disciples kept silent and told no one of any of the things they'd seen. We've learned that God's glory can't be brought about by us, can't be contained or kept by us, can't be held or embodied by us. Now we discover that God's glory can't fully be communicated by us. The disciples have seen something they can't find a way to put into words. That makes complete sense when you think about it – if Jesus' transfiguration could have been adequately communicated in words then it probably would never have needed to happen. This is a vision that goes beyond words, and a reminder to those of us who like to use words and ideas and concepts that God is finally beyond description. Any communication of God is, in the end, brought about not by us but by God. If you find it hard to share your faith, it may be not so much that your faith is lacking. It may be that you've seen glory and ever after you find it hard to put into words.

That's what we learn about glory from the disciples. Glory is the wonder that God is dazzling, even when we are yawning. Glory is the wonder that God is a cloud surrounding us, even when we are trying hard to contain or control or commodify him. Glory is the wonder that is always beyond us, and we can never finally make a feature of our personality or our possession or our embodiment or our knowledge. Glory is the wonder that

goes beyond words, beyond speech, beyond description. It is the dazzling light that blinds the all-seeing and the fragile, flickering candle that enlightens the blind.

Have your eyes seen the glory? Sure, our imagination often shrinks to what sleep, and technology, and our desire for control and our fear of the unknown allows us to see. But God still reveals his glory. And this story tells us where.

God reveals his glory in setting people free. That's what the Old Testament, the story of Israel, of Moses and Elijah, is fundamentally about. Have you seen God setting people free? Have you seen forgiveness free a person, maybe you, from guilt? Have you seen a friendship, maybe yours, free a person from despair? Have you seen a careful, kind hands free a person, maybe you, from sickness? Have you seen a word of faith, maybe from you, free a person from fear? Have you seen a teacher of wisdom and understanding free a person, maybe you, from the cloud of not knowing? Have you seen an act of courage or gestures of faithful endurance, free a person, maybe you, from a prison of their own or others' making? That's where to look for glory.

God reveals his glory in suffering. That's what the cross is fundamentally about. Have you seen God's glory in moments of your own suffering? Have you seen God's glory in another person's pain? Are you putting your own suffering in the presence of God, for him to transfigure? Are you putting yourself in the presence of another person's suffering expecting to see transfiguration the way the first disciples did? That's where to find glory.

God reveals his glory in the church – the ordinary, clumsy, small-minded church. Have you seen God in the prose or the poetry of the life of the church? Have you dwelt in worship, in small habits of generosity or fellowship, in striking risks of mercy or kindness, in stumbling attempts at hospitality or holiness? Have you looked for God's hand among a people sharing a common life over months, years, maybe decades, of mission projects and confirmation classes and finance committees and tearful funerals? That's where your tired, weary eyes might just see glory.

But there's one more question. Jesus was transfigured when he went away to pray. Do you go away to pray? And, when you do so, are you asking or expecting or wanting or yearning for God to transfigure *you*? Because the biggest surprise of all might be that *you* – tired, weary, terrified, clumsy, inarticulate as you are – might one day really let yourself be the location of God's profound conversation, of God's great debate between law and prophecy, freedom and obedience, wonder and ordinariness, suffering and salvation. Let your heart and mind and body to be taken up in that holy argument. Let your whole life become a prayer. Wait for your face and clothes to dazzle and brighten. And then let others see the face of God in you. Let others come close to you and, when they do, let them say, "I feel like God is about to surround me like a cloud of smoke."

I pray that you may see God's glory. I pray you may see the glory of God in God setting people free, in those who, like Jesus, are content to risk suffering that God may set others free. But I pray also that the Holy Spirit may transfigure *you*. I pray also that you may bring your freedom, your foolishness, your suffering into the presence of God. I pray also that you will let each of them be so transfigured by the Holy Spirit that others may see the glory of God in *you*.