

Brancepeth Sermon

11 February 2018: Sunday next before Lent

2 Kings 2:1–12; Ps 50:1–6; 2 Cor 4:3–6; Mk 9:2–9

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts
be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.*

I'm afraid I've decided not to tackle

our Old Testament reading today.

It's that story of what happens when the old leader,

the prophet Elijah, gets news that he's about to be promoted,

which means there's going to be a vacancy left behind him; it's about the sadness of his leaving,

about the strange recruitment process for his successor,

about the advice received about that process

from people in the local religious hierarchy,

and about the way that,

on the day when his promotion is finally to be enacted, there's a strange coach journey involved.

Try as I might, I couldn't work out how to connect that story to our lives here in Brancepeth, so I'm leaving it to one side.

Instead, I want to talk about *light*.

Our Psalm today says that

'Out of Zion, perfect in beauty, God *shines* out.'

That picture, that metaphor of God shining,

of God dwelling in light, is so widespread in Scripture

and in the Christian tradition –

it's one of the main images we have to try and capture,

to help us imagine, God's *glory*, God's *splendour*.

But it's an image that can pull in two different directions. There can be an emphasis on *beauty*,

on the dazzling but enticing,

captivating and compelling nature of God.

But it can also be *forbidding*:

the first letter to Timothy, for instance, talks about God dwelling in *unapproachable* light – a blinding light,

a light so bright, so pure, that you can't look at it,

so bright that it sears your eyes if you try to –

the light of a refining fire, hot enough to purify

anything that comes near it.

Peter, James and John,

on the mountain with Jesus in our Gospel reading,

are terrified.

It may be because of the mysterious appearance of

Moses and Elijah – and let's face it,

you'd have to be made of strangely stern stuff
not to be at least mildly put off your game
by those two suddenly appearing –
but it could also simply be their reaction to this light.
They know their scriptures, these disciples.
They know that this same Moses, centuries before,
had himself been on a different mountain-top –
on Sinai, receiving the law –
witnessing *this* light, the light of God's glory –
and the stories they knew told of this as an *unbearable* light,
a light that was more than Moses' eyes and mind
could take in –
a light from which he needed protection.
'The appearance of the glory of the Lord',
they would have read in the book of Exodus,
'was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain';
they would have read of God telling Moses,
'you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live' – and about Moses being hidden
in a cleft in the rock
to protect him as the glory of God shone out.
And yet here *they* are, with that same Moses, on a mountain, open-faced, open-eyed,
looking at the light of God's glory shining before them –
the overwhelming, unbearable, annihilating light.
No wonder they were terrified.

Now if we go down that path,
thinking about the light in that kind of way,
it does suggest one way of reading this story.
We might read it as saying that Jesus, as the Son of God,
the true image of God's glory, as God incarnate,
shines with this same blinding light,
a light which would simply dissolve the likes of us.
And we might think that the idea is that, most of the time, Jesus dials down this light –
dials it all the way down, hiding it, disguising it –
so that he can pass as a normal human being,
so that he can get close to people without
blowing them away.
And if we thought that way,
we might think that here on the mountain top,
he turns the dial just a few notches back
towards its proper setting –
so that his true light shines out,
and the disciples get a glimpse of what he *really* looks like.
He doesn't unleash the full force; they're left standing – terrified, prattling on rather
incoherently,
but more or less unscathed – but he's been merciful,
and hasn't turned the dial back up to full.

Well, I *don't* want you to read this story like that.
I just don't think that's how this story works.
This isn't a moment when the disguise slips,
and we catch a glimpse of the real and terrifying face of Jesus – a face utterly *unlike* ours –
behind the mask.
No, it's a moment when the Father, as it were,
shines a light on his Son,
provides us with a giant visual clue,
something like a visual sermon illustration if you like,
to try to get the disciples – to try to get *us* –
to recognise what's going on.
To recognise what it is we see when we see the face of Jesus; the ordinary face, the fully
human face, the face *like ours*.

Because when we see Jesus' face, Jesus' ordinary face,
we see God's glory.
Whenever we see Jesus' face, whenever we see his *life*,
when we hear his words, when we encounter his actions –
we meet God's glory.

As the disciples got to know Jesus as their master,
as their friend,
as their teacher,
as the one who loved them to the end –
as they encountered him eating with them,
telling them stories,
challenging them,
feeding them –
they were meeting God's glory.

After all, God *is* love.
God is the one who brings the whole world into being
in order to share life with it, to have friendship with it.
God is the one who delights in the goodness
of what God has made.
God is the one who comes to live in its midst.
God is the one who refuses to give up on
a relationship with creation,
however much that creation turns away.

God is the one who takes on all the cost of
repairing the breaks in that relationship,
all the harm we have done to ourselves and to the world.
God is the one who steps over any barrier
to offer reconciliation –
who touches the untouchable,
approaches the unapproachable,

who can't be kept out by impurity,
by disobedience, by animosity,
by *darkness*
or even by mediocrity and apathy and sheer ordinary unimpressiveness.

That is God's glory.
That is God's splendour and majesty.
That is the light that pours out of God –
That unstoppable love.

And *that* is what shines out of Jesus face,
every moment of his life.

That's what Paul in our 2 Corinthians reading calls
'the light of the knowledge of the glory of God
in the face of Jesus Christ' –
piling up words to try and capture the beauty he has seen.

It's a light that, elsewhere in the New Testament, we are told is most visible not on the
mountaintop but *on the cross* –
on the cross where the lengths to which Jesus will go
for the sake of love
are made most clear.

So, to the question, '*What on earth does God look like?*' –
the question Moses had asked, eager to see God's face –
to that question, '*What on earth does God look like?*',
the voice on the mountain top shines a spotlight, and says,
'Look at my beloved Son'.

And Peter, on that mountain top – bless him –
awkward Peter, seeing this amazing vision or whatever it was and asking not what it means
but how to make practical arrangements
to make sure it stays around –
Well Peter gets one thing right.
'It is good for us to be here' he says.
And he's right. It *is* good for them to be there.
The light that shines out of Jesus –
the light that they are shown in this great
illustrative demonstration on the mountain top –
the real light that shines out of Jesus
every moment of every day, undisguised
– is *good for them*.

It's challenging, it's purifying –

Jesus *is* dangerous to be around,
if you're looking to be left as you were.
There may be times when you wish you *could* hide from it
in a cleft in the rock –
but it is, fundamentally *good for you*.

And there's one more thing.
That light, says Paul, shines in our hearts.
And it is supposed to shine out of us.

It *does* shine out of us.

The light of God's glory –
it is visible, right now, in this building.
I'm not going to ask you to look round at each other's faces, because that would just be embarrassing.
But the glory of God shines out of those faces.
It shines out of those *lives* around you.
Unevenly, *of course*; sometimes very dimly – *of course!* –
and believe me, I can be very, very dim.
But: whenever, and to whatever extent, we look like Jesus – whenever, by the grace of God, we are enabled to communicate *anything* of Jesus' love for one another and for those around us, when we comfort one another, when we challenge and encourage one another – whenever we repent and are forgiven, when we forgive one another, Jesus has taught us that that *is* the visibility of God's glory; that is the light that shone on that mountain top.

That light shines out of us.
And of course God wants it to shine brighter
and will make it shine brighter,
will help us to shine brighter
if we accept God's help.
But by God's grace, with his help,
it *already* shines.
Not just in a few of us –
the clergy perhaps, or the specially religious,
or the particularly pious –
but in all of us.

So, to the question, 'What on *earth* does God look like?
What does the *glory* of God look like?' –
the other answer we are given is: '*Look around you!*'

*Holy God,
We see your glory in the face of Jesus Christ:
May we who are partakers at his table
Reflect his life in word and deed,
That all the world may know
His power to change and save.
This we ask through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen*