

Sermon on 23 February 2020

Exodus 24:12-end, 2 Peter 1:16-end, Matthew 17:1-9

Lord, open our hearts and minds to your message, and help us to integrate your words into our lives. Amen. Please be seated.

Last Sunday, Anna preached very beautifully about the glory of creation, and, being a fervent watcher of nature documentaries, I thought that, surely, there is nothing more glorious than creation. Today we learned: there is! The one thing more glorious than creation is: obviously the Creator himself!

Nobody can see God and live, but as so often, Jesus acts as the mediator: His dazzling appearance on the mountain gave an idea of how glorious the Creator might be. The three eye-witnesses were just about able to cope with it. Initially, Peter even babbled on in an attempt to express his wonderment: *"Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here!"* Only to be interrupted by the voice of God himself: *"This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"* Despite the drama of the scene, I find this rather funny, as if God was saying: 'Come on, Peter, just shut up and start listening!'

It did work for a while: Peter fell to the ground, stunned into silence. For a moment, he simply accepted what he saw: God's glory. Later, many questions must have swirled through his head: What was this all about? Which is our question this morning as well:

Looking at our Exodus reading today, and some others thereafter, we find a lot of parallels: the location = a mountain top, covered by a cloud; the incident = a lot of dazzling light, and the transformation: the faces of Moses and Jesus shining 'like the sun', radiating God's glory; the reaction of the witnesses: awe and fear. Every good Jew could instantly understand, that the resemblance of these two scenes declared: Jesus has law-giving authority.

Let's look at it step by step:

First, what is it with mountain tops? Do you really think you are closer to God on a high mountain? Is God not everywhere? However, if you have ever been on a mountain top, looking down, you know how it feels: It gives one a completely new perspective. All human strive and struggle seems to be far away, and one is overcome by a feeling of awe and peace. God's answer to Job comes into mind: *"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?"* (Job 38:4) And that's the point: We need to get our perspective right. Not an easy feat: It takes a lot of effort to get onto a mountain! Once there, you make photos in a feeble attempt to conserve the moment. I think that is why Peter had this almost childish idea to build three tents for Elijah, Moses and Jesus. If only such glory could be contained and anchored onto earth!

Secondly, what about this strange incident, the transformation: Why was it necessary? I think it was for two reasons: We must not forget that after all, Jesus was fully human. He experienced a range of human emotions, and at this point in the story, I can imagine that he needed some encouragement. He had set his path to Jerusalem ... he knew the events would unfold now with increasing speed ... Jesus must have felt very much alone at times, alienated from his family, misunderstood by his disciples, and facing the terrible prospect of what was to come.

Jesus must have grappled with this nagging thought: 'Is this really what you want me to do, Father, really?' His Father gave him the support he needed, just as He did on the day of Jesus' baptism: *"This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased!"* This is probably as close to a cuddle as you can get from God.

Another reason why Jesus went to the mountain, taking Peter, James and John with him, was to teach them: There was still so much they had to learn! There was no way they would understand all of this in one go, so the experience of the transformation would help them later to make sense of Jesus' death and resurrection. And it was not by chance that Jesus took three witnesses, since this was the required number if you wanted to prove a truth in a court case. Jesus knew the disciples would later be faced with this challenging task to build

up the church, and they needed eye-witness accounts to prove their story. In our reading from Peter's second epistle, this is precisely what is so convincing, because *"For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty!"* And since the story is to be found also in the Gospels of Mark and Luke, it is clearly backed up by sufficient evidence: It did happen indeed! And if you meditate upon it, and visualise it, you feel this tingling down your spine, and you do know it is true.

The third parallel between the later Exodus story and our Matthew reading today was the reaction of the witnesses: awe and fear. It is the natural reaction to God's presence, and it authenticates Jesus' identity and his mission: This is indeed God's Son, and he is the only one who does obediently all the things his Father wants, and this is indeed the beginning of God's Kingdom. Elijah and Moses are only supporting acts in this unfolding drama of redemption. The echo of the divine voice must have stayed with Peter, James and John for a long time: *"Listen to him!"*

I wonder: What went through the minds of the disciples when they came down from the mountain? Jesus' command was clear: *"Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."* What? Tell no one? Not even the other disciples? How can you keep an experience like this to yourself? Could you?

Actually, I think it wasn't so hard. Because, after an experience like this, you feel as if you were hit by a bus. You almost cannot believe it really happened. A friend of mine had a bit of an experience like this, obviously on a much, much smaller scale. She is a rather introvert, shy person, but nevertheless, she was asked to help with worship leading in church. As you can imagine, she felt pleased to be entrusted with the task, but at the same time, she was absolutely terrified. Standing in front of a congregation? Talk? Argh! (*fearful gesture*) As a good Christian, she knew only prayer would help, so she arrived well before the service to ask for calmness and strength. And then it happened: There was no light and no voice, but ... a presence. It was so powerful that it brought her down on her knees. She could hardly breathe ... she could not think, she just WAS, and the presence was with her. The experience lasted only a few seconds. Or minutes? She could not say. Gradually it waned and then ... was gone. She stood up and could hardly believe that she had been granted with such an experience.

Needless to say, the service went really well, and in the end, she became a vicar. However, she never talked about this experience until much later, and she only told a few of her closest friends. Why not shout it out loud to everybody?

Well, you know, why. Everybody would have thought that she is nuts. What has become of our times that you cannot talk openly about such things anymore? That was the one advantage Peter and his friends had: In those days, people understood that amazing things can indeed happen if God wills them. Nowadays, we have to re-learn that time and again, and that's the reason why we are gathered here. Knowing full well that the account of the transformation is true, how can we not follow God's will? And yet, we stray. It is so hard. Jesus did always the right thing: He would not do anything important without consulting God first. It is one of the fundamental differences between Jesus and us: that he always asked: 'What does God wish me to do?' We nearly always ask: 'What do I wish to do?' There is another sermon in this, but let's close here with some lines of a hymn by Horatius Bonar:

Thy way, not mine, O Lord,
However dark it be;
Lead me by Thine own hand,
Choose out the Path for me. Amen.