

Mark 9:2-9

11.02.18

Enlightened

Our reading from Mark this morning takes us pretty much exactly to the midpoint of his Gospel. Behind us lie about ten pages of Mark's account of Jesus' ministry, and there are about ten pages to go. And what better way to signify that we are halfway through than to take us up a mountain? Up we go with Jesus' closest disciples, Peter, James and John and from there we can look back to what has been and forward to what is to come. So, up here on the mountain a voice declares 'This is my Son, the beloved', and when we hear that we are directed back to the beginning of the Gospel where, at Jesus baptism, a voice declared, 'You are my Son, the Beloved'. But from this point on Jesus is more and more preoccupied with what is going to happen to him in the future. Much to his disciples' consternation he has already started talking about his death that awaits him when he reaches Jerusalem, a topic that will increasingly preoccupy him. And indeed when Peter, James and John see Jesus transfigured, his clothes dazzling white, maybe they are already catching a glimpse of the glory that awaits Jesus beyond death, beyond the shame and humiliation of the cross. And so from this mountain top we look back and we look forward and the entire panorama of Jesus' ministry comes into view, and as this happens the truth of Jesus is being revealed. It is as if the curtain of time is being drawn aside and eternity is being glimpsed, as Jesus is revealed in all his heavenly splendour. And these disciples need to see this. They need to witness it and to have it seared on their memories. Because in what lies ahead Jesus will be submerged in suffering and darkness and humiliation. He will experience the full horror of godforsakenness, and it is therefore crucial to see and to remember him as he truly is: bathed in love and light and the presence of God.

The story of Jesus' transfiguration is therefore profoundly revealing of Jesus, of his identity, of his ministry. This morning, however, I want to think for a while of this as a story not just about Jesus but about us – about you and me, residents of Amsterdam in the 21st century, and let me explain. As we are constantly reminded, the particular era in which we are living here in Europe is one in which the Christian faith is massively in decline and the forces of what we call secularism – life without God – are growing ever stronger. And we are

forced to ask, what is happening to a culture once described as ‘Christian’? What does it mean to be the church, Jesus people, at such a time? And reading this account of the transfiguration we could see in it the story of where we have come from. After all, there are Peter, James and John in the presence of Moses, the great law-giver, and Elijah, the great prophet. And this is a reminder that our culture, our civilisation, is built on the foundations of the Judaeo-Christian, Biblical narrative. And there in their midst stands Jesus, transfigured, for it is the Gospel of the crucified and risen Lord that has profoundly shaped our history and our identity. And Peter wants to build dwellings to preserve this moment and we are reminded of how we have built a dwelling place for Jesus, the Church, founded as it is on Peter’s confession that Jesus is the Messiah. And we think of the role that the church has played, for evil as well as for good, in the history of our world. But then, as suddenly as it came, the glory departs and Jesus and the disciples leave the mountain and come back down to earth. And when we read on of the growing hostility to Jesus and his movement, culminating in his death, it does not take a huge stretch of the imagination to see here a preview of our journey from a once so-called ‘Christian’ culture to our current secular, sceptical state.

With this passage from Mark in mind, however, what is interesting about this shift in our culture is that while its roots go far further back it is very much associated with the movement that began in the 17th century, and in which Amsterdam played such a key role, and that we call the ‘Enlightenment’. This was the period dedicated to the banishment of the shadows of faith and superstition by the shining light of reason and science. So it’s interesting that in the Gospel story the disciples are ‘enlightened’ up there on the mountain, in the company of Moses and Elijah and Jesus. In the modern account, by contrast, it is the mountain top with Moses and Elijah and Jesus that represents the darkness of faith and superstition while the move away from all that is called ‘enlightenment’!

Well, the question that we must surely ask as Christians is what kind of a world are we left with when it is drained of the divine. What remains when the radiance of heavenly glory has been dispelled, when the voice on the mountain which commands us to listen to Jesus is silenced? What kind of a world are we left with? And what provoked that question in me partly was starting a book that some in this congregation are currently reading and discussing, a New York Times bestseller that came out in 2011 and which is

called, appropriately enough for this Sunday, 'All Things Shining'. In the introduction to the book the authors, Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly, state that it is aimed at anyone in our contemporary world 'who wants to lure back the shining things, to uncover the wonder we were once capable of experiencing...' Now, isn't that fascinating? It suggests that somehow our modern faithless, Godless world has grown somewhat dull, with the banishing of 'the shining things' and the loss of a sense of wonder that was part and parcel of our religious heritage. In other words, maybe our journey down the mountain and towards so-called 'enlightenment' needs to be reversed and we need to find some way back up to that shining world. The concern of this book is that even in a secular world we need some sense of the transcendent, a sense of something beyond, some 'shining' that can provide moments of illumination and meaning, a surge of purpose and gratitude. And where are these to come from? Well, I won't spoil the book for you, but it draws upon Western literature and points us in various directions. Interestingly, given that in the Transfiguration story Jesus takes with him up the mountain Peter, James and John where they are joined there by Moses and Elijah, Dreyfus and Kelly direct us to experiences of community celebration. This leads them, slightly oddly, to focus on great sporting occasions as experiences of shining. Thus they write, 'The great athlete in the midst of play rises up and shines – all the attention is drawn to him. And everyone around him – the players in the field, the coaches on the sidelines, the fans in the stadium, the announcers in the booth – everyone understands who they are who they are and what they are to do immediately in relation to the sacred event that is occurring.' Note there the language of the sacred! I have to say that my immediate response to such eulogising of sport is that clearly Dreyfus and Kelly have never had the experience of supporting Scotland in a rugby international, but here is the secular quest for the shining, for some sense of transfiguration, albeit without recourse to the divine. Others find it elsewhere. It seems, for example, that arch-atheist Richard Dawkins is aware that his exclusive focus on science is open to the charge of rendering a dull and diminished account of reality. So he wrote a book called 'The Magic of Reality' in which he states that 'The feeling of awed wonder that science can give us is one of the highest experiences of which the human psyche is capable.' And elsewhere he writes of his feeling of 'exultation' and the 'overwhelming feeling of being' elicited by his experience of the natural world. And he even describes looking up at The Milky Way or

down at the Grand Canyon and feeling overwhelmed with a sense of gratitude, though we might argue that gratitude surely requires someone to be grateful to. But we can sympathise, nevertheless, with Dawkins' yearning for reality to be richer, to be deeper, to be aglow with wonder and not diminished as a result of scientific enquiry.

So in our secular age we must seek for that sense of the beyond. Others might seek it in beauty, in art, in the realm of music or painting. In a great concert, or as we stand transfixed before a great picture, something of the depth and richness of reality is disclosed. Our eyes are opened to see in ways that we have not seen before. It might happen in witnessing the birth of a baby or in the joy of falling in love.

So what are we to make of all this? Well, as Christians we surely affirm that reality is marvelously rich and dense and mysterious. We are subject to awe and wonder, to moments of illumination and celebration when our spirits are exalted and things shine, and in these we rejoice. But we need to be clear. What happened on that mountain top that day with Peter and James and John, and Moses and Elijah and Jesus was something else altogether. This was not simply a heightening of earthly reality, this was a breaking in of heavenly reality. This was not just creation transposed to a higher key, this was God reaching down, disclosing his presence amongst us in Jesus, his Beloved Son. This is about God. And when we banish God from the world we may find all sorts of substitutes, but they will never be anything more than substitutes. And when we expect them to be bearers of meaning and purpose then we are asking them to carry a load far greater than they can bear.

In our reading from Paul's second letter to the Church at Corinth he speaks of the light of Christ who shines upon us and into the depths of our hearts. At the end of the previous chapter he has written of how, as the glory of Christ shines upon us, we are changed, transformed. This is about more than mere wonder, or awe, the buzz of a great sporting event or a great concert. This is about God, who is beyond, reaching into our midst and doing something only God can do. This is about a relationship with us in which God is completing what he has begun in us, making us fully human, endowed with the divine image. It's about not just transformation but transfiguration. It's about our final destination as human beings, when we will shine with the glory of God as Jesus did that day, and when we shall know ourselves to be the Beloved, and when God will be all in all, to who be glory forever. Amen.