

Sermon      Light and Glory      15.02.15  
Mark 9:2-9    2 Cor. 3:13 – 4:6      St John's URC

When in the Gospel According to Mark, Jesus is transfigured and his appearance becomes a dazzling white, this is an attempt to express Jesus's divine glory by a visual depiction of light. When in the Second Letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes of "the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:4) he is attempting to put into words the spiritual illumination that the gospel of Christ brings to those who trust in it. I wish to argue that if people seem unable to see 'the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ' it is not so much due to blindness as it is due to an excess of light.<sup>1</sup>

First, there is the *light of reason and science*. A young humanities graduate, writing in the Guardian comment section recently, claims that,

... science offers a deeply satisfying model for how we got to be here. As for why we are here, without religion we have the freedom to determine our own fate and to find our own purpose. Initial scepticism about God, often during early childhood, is consolidated later by the superior explanatory power of modern science. Science works.<sup>2</sup>

Those of us who benefit from the technology and advances that science makes possible, such as medicine, motor vehicles, and electronics can hardly quibble with the argument that at many practical levels, science works. And some will agree that scientists have provided explanations for many things that were inexplicable to previous generations. But as to science's competence to explain *why we are here*, I would certainly wish

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Shawnthea Monroe-Mueller, 'Pastoral Perspective' pp. 446-8, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 1*, D Bartlett & B Brown Taylor Ed's, Westminster John Knox Press, 2008

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/feb/12/religion-atheism-britons-god>

to challenge the view that science provides an adequate basis on which we can 'determine our own fate and find our own purpose'. Hard science, by which I mean experimental science, is no help at all in deciding what is ethical or unethical, or in providing a purpose for which to live. Science often sheds no light on the fundamental human need for morality and purpose.

Some have realized the limitations of hard science and have therefore been drawn, secondly, to the growing *light of self-realization approaches*. Peruse the shelves of any bookstore, or put a relevant term into any computer search engine, and you will find a huge range of self-help authors and coaches who promise to help you to realise and fulfil all your dreams and give you the life you want. In an advertisement in Thursday's *Barnet Press* one such 'coach' asks:

Do you have the feeling everything is going wrong in your life? Don't hesitate to call me the most acclaimed medium, god gifted and well known for his competence and efficiency. Expert in all occult matters, even the most desperate cases for immediate help in looking for love, family reunions, bringing back loved ones and lost friends. Strengthen your marriage, relationship, strange illness, bad luck and good protection and make your business centre attractive for customers.

At the bottom of the advertisement, in very small print, are the words: "For Entertainment Only"!

What most of the self-realization and self-help and life-coaching approaches seem to do is *place you in the spotlight*. If that placement in the spotlight brings about a constructively critical engagement with your problems and challenges, then that is a good thing. However, my suspicion is that some, like

the person who placed the advertisement, are promising wildly unrealistic solutions to intractable problems, and those most likely to be taken-in by such promises are the desperate and gullible.

In over 20 years of pastoral ministry my observation is that for most people there are no quick fixes to problems with relationships, health and finances. When improvements occur, it is often because the person involved is able to *change his or her attitude and behaviour towards the problem*. That kind of change is seldom instantaneous but requires hard work. When change does eventually come, it is noticeable that people often step out of the spotlight, become less self-focused, and direct their attention elsewhere. When you step out of spotlight you can begin to see the light of the glory of God.

The Church is not immune from the temptation to offer quick-fix solutions, with claims that amount to something like: 'Come to Jesus and all your problems will be solved.' The reason why I risked the ire of Graham Kendrick purists and altered the words of verse 2 of his hymn 'Shine, Jesus, shine' is because I think the original words:

By your blood I may enter your brightness,  
search me, try me, consume all my darkness

give the impression—inadvertently—that if we focus on Jesus with enough intensity, all our 'darkness', or sin, will be 'consumed'. My alteration:

From the cross to your bright resurrection:  
search me, lead me, illumine the darkness,

is attempting to express the idea that the light of gospel does not consume but 'illuminates' sin, such that we begin to realise

the effect of sinful attitudes and actions, and in repentance seek God's forgiveness and grace to change those attitudes and actions. Central to repentance for the Christian is what Paul calls 'dying with Christ' to sin; that is, with Christ's help, recognising the damage done by sinful thoughts and actions, asking for God's forgiveness, and with God's help resolving to change. Repentance gradually and cumulatively puts to death the power that sin has over us. This is what baptism symbolises: drowning the old self with Christ in the water and coming alive with Christ to the new self. The problem is, as one theologian put it, the old self is a good swimmer who doesn't want to die! We know from our Christian experience that there is often no quick fix for deep-seated tendencies and intractable problems. But what the gospel promises, even in the midst of a sin-riven and fallen world, is a radical reorientation. Paul writes:

We do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as servants for Jesus's sake.

2 Cor. 4:5

Self-realization promises that by 'doing this' or 'buying that' 'you can have the life you want'. The gospel of Jesus Christ, by contrast, promises that when we actively trust in Jesus Christ as Lord, we begin to discover *the life that God wants*. And there is a crucial difference between the life we want and the life God wants. We remain Lord over the life we want, we are in control of it; or at least that is what we think. In practice, our own weaknesses and desires often control and distort our lives. For example, the ambitious or hard-working person becomes a workaholic; the kind and caring person becomes overwhelmed by the demands of others; the person who enjoys something too much becomes addicted to it. The life we think we want can become a life we don't want at all.

What the Apostle Paul urges the Corinthians to do, as I urge you to do, is to turn the spotlight off yourself and turn towards Jesus Christ, in whose face is found the light of the glory of God. The life that God wants for each of us is found by trusting in Christ as Lord. Jesus once said:

Forget about yourselves, take up your cross and follow me. Those who want to save their lives will lose them, but those who lose their lives for me will find them.'

Matt. 16:24-25

Jesus is 'the true light that gives light to every person' (Jn. 1:9). Jesus's life was not one in which he did what he wanted, rather he did what God wanted. It was a life dedicated to the service of God, and in that sense it was a different life, a holy life. Jesus's life was also a representative and redemptive life, it was a life lived for others in order to free them from the forces that oppress and enslave, he "gave his life as a ransom for many." But the shame and tragedy of his death by crucifixion was followed by the victory and glory of his resurrection. And the resurrected Jesus was the first fruit of the glorious harvest that is God's intention for the whole creation, the general resurrection when "the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God." (Rom. 8:21)

The film *Selma* is about Martin Luther King's campaign to enable blacks in to vote, centred on the town of Selma, Alabama. Laura and I went to see it yesterday. It contains harrowing depictions of the terrible injustice and violence used against black protestors. King and hundreds of activists, through non-violent resistance, demonstrated to effect a change in the law whereby discriminatory practices to stop blacks from voting were declared illegal. The last part of the film is about King's plan to march with thousands of

protestors over the heavily policed bridge in Selma and walk 50 miles to the state capital of Montgomery, Alabama. A government advisor warns King against this, saying that he cannot ensure the protestors' safety against white vigilantes. King eventually replies, I understand your caution, but 'I must do what God wants.'

When they finally arrive and King speaks to his supporters, both black and white, outside the city hall of Montgomery, President Lyndon Johnson has just introduced legislation outlawing discrimination against universal voting. It is a glorious moment. And King quotes the 'battle hymn of the republic'

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord . . .  
glory, glory, hallelujah! His truth is marching on.

Martin Luther King clearly understood what they were doing and what they had achieved as part of God's glorious work of liberation. So it is with us. The future of St John's Church will not be ensured because we somehow engineer the church we want; we have a future only if we are the church that God wants, that is, if we proclaim and live the liberating gospel of Jesus Christ. As we do so, others will glimpse the light of God's glory in our attitudes and actions, and be drawn to: "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

*Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end.*  
Amen