

Sermon: Second Sunday in Lent: 12 March 2017

And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone (Matt. 17.8).

Just like that, the glory is gone. And maybe we today feel a strange sense of relief at its going. The glory of the Transfiguration feels a bit out of place in this somber season of Lent. The shadow of the cross looms ever larger on the horizon. Is this a time for glory? Much of the church has taken the option to shift this gospel text to an earlier Sunday, outside of Lent, as though the awkwardness were too much to bear. In so doing, we mirror the discomfort of Christ's first disciples, who felt the same awkwardness in trying to reconcile Christ's glory with his cross. For their part, the disciples are much more comfortable in the shimmering glory of the Transfiguration than they are in the shadow of the cross.

But in the (synoptic) Gospels, glory and the cross are woven together as equal strands of the same cord. In Matthew, it's just seven verses before the transfiguration story that Christ first begins to teach his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem to suffer and be killed and be raised again (this is that famous episode where Christ rebukes Peter as a Satan and a stumbling block for trying to change Christ's mind about this mission). And although the overwhelming mood in today's Gospel seems to be glory, the cross appears here too, when Christ commands his disciples to wait until he is raised – from the dead – before revealing these events to others.

Then, only eight verses after the transfiguration passage, Christ again tells his disciples that he "is going to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised" (17.22b-23). Again, the disciples are "greatly distressed," though they seem to have learned by now not to argue with him about this particular issue.

So talk of the cross is uncomfortable and distressing for Christ's disciples. Transfiguration comes as a welcome relief. Peter, famously did not need this moment of glory to recognize Christ for who he was. Not even a week beforehand, he confessed Christ to be "the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (16.16). He is now so pleased to see Christ revealed in his true glory, he wants to preserve the moment. Perhaps if the story took place today, he would whip out his cell-phone and propose a mountain-top group selfie. Instead, he hopes that building shelters might entice the miraculous visitors to stay a while.

But God interrupts Peter's babbling about capturing the moment of glory. As we read last week, the desert is what followed Christ's glorious post-baptismal epiphany. Likewise, today's moment of glory is not something to capture, not something to cling to. This mountain-top experience, like every mountain-top experience, is fleeting. It is a moment to catch a glimpse of something extraordinary, to shed new light, to gain new perspective, and then to head back down the mountain, not vainly longing for a return to the peak, but with renewed resolve to live differently because of it.

At Christ's baptism, God spoke these words to him: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" (3.17). Now, God speaks the same words about Christ to the disciples, adding, "listen to him!" The command hardly seems necessary. Shouldn't it be implied already by the statement of his divine identity? But, even Christ had to spend time in the desert to work out what this identity meant. He had to come to terms with the paradox that being God's Son meant that he must embrace the helpless frailty of his humanity. In the same way, the disciples now need to listen to Christ when he insists that his divine glory leads him to the shameful cross, that his divine power leads him to weakness and suffering. As we will see, the disciples repeatedly fail to listen, or to take to heart what Christ tells them.

And we shouldn't be surprised if we likewise fail. So often, we behave as if it is enough that we know (or think we know) who Christ is. We claim, like Peter, to understand that he is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. And we then proceed to tell him what we think he should do. We build dwellings in which we hope to keep him, domesticated to our assumptions about what God should be up to in the world. We even offer ourselves to the cause, busily training ourselves and one another to do what we presume is God's work in the world. We co-opt the techniques and strategies of the world to bring success and prosperity to Christ's church. And all the time, we make ourselves deaf to God's own words: "listen to him!"

A certain Danish philosopher has written that, "To pray does not mean to listen to oneself speaking. Prayer involves becoming silent, and being silent, and waiting until God is heard."ⁱ Not only in our prayer, but in all our life, we so often behave as if our God-given task is to speak, to act, to build, to do. Especially when we catch a glimpse of glory, we react as if we already know what to do about it: get on with spreading the glory! But the story of the Transfiguration suggests otherwise.

The story of the Transfiguration suggests that a glimpse of glory is meant to get our attention long enough to shut us up, to provoke us to silence, to listening. In that listening silence, we may hear the voice of Christ firmly reminding us that the destiny of divine glory on earth is the cross, where human sin and divine love collide, where the shame of the cross is all the glory Christ desires. May we receive grace to let go of glory and to embrace the cross, as Christ embraces the whole world with his arms stretched wide for us.

Amen

ⁱ S. Kierkegaard