

FAITH & GENEROSITY REFLECTION

LIGHT

Exodus 24:12-18 - 2 Peter 1 16 end - Matthew 17:1-9

Exodus 24:12-18

12 The Lord said to Moses, 'Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.' 13 So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. 14 To the elders he had said, 'Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them.'

15 Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. 16 The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. 17 Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. 18 Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

2 Peter 1 16 end.

Eyewitnesses of Christ's Glory

16 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. 17 For he received honour and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, 'This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.' 18 We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.

19 So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. 20 First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, 21 because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

Matthew 17:1-9

17 Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. 2 And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. 3 Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. 4 Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' 5 While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!' 6 When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. 7 But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Get up and do not be afraid.' 8 And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. 9 As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, 'Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.'

How many of us have a stash of candles - real or battery-powered - in case of a power cut? Perhaps it is not often these days that we are in total darkness, but I do remember, many years ago, as a child staying with my aunt and uncle, waking up to find myself in total darkness - not a hint of light anywhere. I set off reasonably confidently - trying not to make a sound - for the bathroom. It turned out that my sense of direction left something to be desired, as when I eventually found a light switch, I was in a larder!

Today's passage is certainly about light. As Matthew describes, it was on Mount Tabor that Jesus' disciples witnessed His Transfiguration. To say they were amazed is an understatement. Matthew says they were '*overcome with fear*'. In his account, Luke says they were '*terrified*' (Lk. 9:34). One thing is certain: the Gospel writers describe a light... a dazzling, radiant brightness. Matthew describes how Jesus' face '*shone like the sun*'. Though fully human, God's grace shone through Jesus, making him radiant and transfigured with light.

Thousands of years later, some might see the Transfiguration as merely a remote event in Jesus' life. Yet we know that Christians from the earliest times have recognised that the Transfiguration also reveals what God desires for all of us.

We cannot help but be reminded of St Paul's words in his second letter to the Corinthians:

12 Since, then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness, 13 not like Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside. 14 But their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside. 15 Indeed, to this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds; 16 but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. 17 Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. 18 And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:12-18)

Christian life, Paul makes clear, is where we can see God's glory, come into contact with God's very presence, and not only see but also be transformed, changed by it, increasingly '*from one degree of glory to another*'

Paul is, of course, referring to Moses when he writes '*with unveiled face*', describing how Moses' face shone after meeting God and how he then veiled his face until he went again to speak with God.

29 Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God 30 When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him. 31 But Moses called to them; and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them. 32 Afterwards all the Israelites came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the Lord had spoken with him on Mount Sinai. 33 When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face; 34 but whenever Moses went in before the Lord to speak with him, he would take the veil off, until he came out; and when he came out, and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, 35 the Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining; and Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with him. (Ex.34:29-35)

Back to St Paul... 'When one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed.' (2 Cor. 3:16) 'Paul tells us that the veil, *'minds [that] were hardened'*, creates distance, but turning to the Lord gives access: *'Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom'*, freedom to be *'transformed into the same image'*. The light spreads, radiates and permeates, reshaping the beholder *'as though reflected in a mirror'*.'

Paul goes further in the next chapter: 'For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ. (2 Cor. 4:6).

The glory of God is not abstract. It is revealed in the face of Jesus Christ. And His light shines *'in our hearts'*. We are talking about inward illumination.

Paul's words *'Into the same image'* (2 Cor. 3:18) speak of a *theosis*-shaped salvation - transformation into likeness. Later Eastern theology treats 2 Corinthians 3:18 as one of its great texts on theosis.

As Paul makes clear, transformation is rooted in the Trinitarian work of the Spirit, *'this comes from the Lord, the Spirit'* (2 Cor. 3:18), bringing us into divine participation. Ultimately, seeing God is communion, drawing us into His radiance and transforming us into what we behold.

Seeing the Glory of God

How can we describe our Christian hope? Rowan Williams expresses this brilliantly:

*'What the Christian hopes and prays for is that at the end he or she will be brought by the grace of God's Spirit to see the glory of God as it is shown in the face of Jesus, and to be so united with his prayer to the Father that we never fall away. All that the observer might see in a Christian meeting for worship is directed towards this. We seek to let the life that was alive in Jesus be alive in each one of us through the gift of God's Spirit. And we pray that this life will, through us, bring healing and peace to all the world'*¹

Ronald W Dale tells the story of attending a lecture by the distinguished biblical scholar Professor Joachim Jeremias at the University of Birmingham. Dale remembers the lecture as *'interesting, informative, scholarly and stimulating'*. Years later, though, he remembers a chance encounter with the Professor as he leaves the lecture hall. Much to his surprise, he realises that the Professor is leaving the hall just behind him. As he holds the door open for the Professor to pass through, Dale is astonished. He writes:

*'And then it happened. As the Professor came parallel with me, I looked at his face. Indeed, I was forced to look at his face because I became aware, for the first time in my life, of sheer burning holiness in the life of another person. So great was the sense of the holiness of God in the face and body of Professor Jeremias, I could actually feel heat and light radiating from him. As I observed the Professor's face, I was almost forcibly struck by his radiance. It was a fact that seemed almost transparent, with love and goodness and grace. It was the face of a man who had spent long hours communing with God, and it showed in his face. It was transfigured with an unearthly radiance'*²

I am reminded of one of Austin Farrer's sermons in 'The End of Man', where he describes living saints thus: *'their words are like their faces and their faces are like their hearts'*.³

¹ Rowan Williams, *What is Christianity?* (London, SPCK. 2015).

² Ronald W Dale, *Windows on Matthew*, (Bury St Edmunds, Kevin Mahew Limited 1998)

³ Austin Farrer, *The End of Man* (London, SPCK 1973)

Generosity

At the heart of the light of Christ is generosity. Jesus was not merely filled with divine light; He gave it away. He healed, He forgave, He served, and ultimately He gave everything on the hill of Calvary.

Participating in His light means living as He did, with generous hearts, freely giving our time, talents, and financial resources to love and serve our churches and our communities.

St. Paul describes this as walking *'as children of light'* (Eph. 5:8). What does this walking look like? It looks like generosity that asks nothing in return. It looks like serving those in need. It looks like loving even when there seems to be little to love. It looks like reflecting the light of Christ courageously and generously in a world darkened by selfishness and greed.

To be sure, participating in the light does not mean we will never face darkness. There will be times when we feel we have lost our sense of direction and are groping in the dark. We know Jesus did not teach that we would escape suffering, but that He would be with us in the darkness.

We know too that experiencing the light of Christ isn't about escaping the dark; it is about allowing God to shed light on the darkness, not least on the dark recesses of our hearts.

Children of Light

We strive to radiate something of Christ's divine brightness. Yet we know this is not just our personal journey towards God - it is our calling as *'children of light'* (Eph. 5:8).

14 'You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. 15 No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. (Matt. 5:14)

Dale's account of his encounter with Professor Jeremias describes *'long hours communing with God'*.

We see Peter's words are well placed in the Lectionary: *'[We] will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place until the day dawns and morning star rises in your hearts'* (2 Pet. 1:19).