

A Glimpse of Glory

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 14th February 2021 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: 2 Kings 2:1-12; Mark 9:2-9 (Sunday before Lent, Year B in RCL)

Introduction

Last Tuesday I completed a course which I have been leading for 8 members of this church, called *The Jesus Way*. The last session was about trusting God for the future, and we looked at part of chapter 8 of Paul's letter to the Romans. Here are two verses from that chapter which are favourites of mine:

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. (*Romans 8:18 NRSV*)

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. (*Romans 8:28 NRSV*)

Here's a question to consider:

Thinking back over the past year, with all its difficulties, what have you experienced, or heard about, that has given you hope, new energy or a sense of purpose?

I wonder whether you've been conscious of God in any of these moments of encouragement? Have you sensed that God was behind any of these events? Has prayer helped you to see things in perspective, or resulted in something positive happening?

I think we all find that when things are difficult, it can help if we sense either that there is a purpose behind it all, or that there is light at the end of the tunnel. And we can also find encouragement from looking back to past experiences of getting through adversity, or from knowing that others are there to support us.

As we grow in the Christian faith, we may find that instead of thinking that God is remote, intervening occasionally in the world to fix the odd problem, we come to think of him as being taking a close and personal interest in everything that goes on in the world, and in our lives, longing for us to involve him more, for example by praying. And from time to time we get a glimpse of what God has been doing behind the scenes, a glimpse of his glory breaking through.

I think that this is what today's gospel story of the Transfiguration of Jesus is all about – a glimpse of glory that gives a sense of perspective. Jesus' disciples have been on a journey with him – not just a physical journey, travelling about from place to place, but a spiritual journey, as they have come to realise quite who he is. In the previous chapter, Jesus asks them first who other people say he is, and then who they say he is, and Peter comes out with his confident declaration "You are God's Messiah". But immediately after this, Jesus begins to tell them that his

mission is first of all to suffer and die – something which they cannot make sense of at all.

And so now, before Jesus heads off towards Jerusalem, where he will be arrested, tried and crucified, he gives his closest 3 disciples a glimpse of the bigger picture. He takes them up a mountain and they get a vision of his true glory as the Son of God, and see him talking with Moses and Elijah, two of the greatest figures in the history of Israel, who represent the Law and the Prophets. [These were the two key ways in which God has communicated with his people in the Old Testament and sought to bring about his purposes for the world.] Jesus, the Messiah, who is also the Son of God, completes the “set” – his mission will soon bring about the salvation of the world.

I have wondered what was the point of this event, which we call the Transfiguration. Was it for the benefit of Jesus, or of his 3 disciples? We know that Jesus often withdrew to the hills to pray alone. Who knows whether his prayer times included meeting spiritually with great leaders of the past? Certainly Jesus in his humanity may well have found strength and clarity of vision by spending these times communing with God and maybe with his predecessors in God’s purposes. And today is a crucial turning point in Jesus’ life, as he prepares to head towards Jerusalem, where he will face rejection, suffering and death.

But for Peter, James and John this was a glimpse of the Big Picture, as they saw their master in his heavenly glory, talking with the great heroes of their faith, Moses and Elijah. They may not have been able to make much sense of their experience at the time, but later, after Jesus’ death and resurrection, it would have helped them to see how his mission was the culmination of God’s whole purpose that had been working out over the centuries.

Taking inspiration from this story, I’d like to share with you four keys to facing an uncertain future with hope and finding the strength to cope with our present difficulties. They all begin with the letter ‘P’:

- Purpose
- Perseverance
- The Promises of God
- Personal experience

Purpose

All of us, as human beings, need to feel that there is a purpose to life, and that somehow everything will ultimately work out as it should. When life is going well, it’s easy to be satisfied with the sense of purpose that we get from our work, from our families, friends and hobbies, and not worry too much about the bigger picture. But when trouble hits, whether the illness of a loved one, a personal tragedy or news of a big disaster or atrocity somewhere else, we suddenly want to know why God isn’t stopping bad things from happening, or we ask “Why *me*?”

Christianity has never hidden the fact that evil is real, that bad things happen and that they can happen to good people, and to people of faith. Why else do you think the world needs saving? And just as Jesus warned his close followers that he would have to suffer, so also he warned that

‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.’ (*Mark 8:34-35 NRSV*)

St Paul knew personally what suffering was about. But he also believed that God had a purpose behind it all, as we see in his second letter to the Corinthians:

⁸ We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰ always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies... we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus...

¹⁶ So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, ¹⁸ because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal. (*2 Corinthians 4:8-18 NRSV*)

In other words, don't despair! The end is in sight, and the end will be glorious. And even in our suffering, a little bit of the life of Jesus can be seen in us. I've never run a marathon, but I understand that the going can be very tough. But the joy and the glory of reaching the finishing line makes it all worth it.

Perseverance

Which brings us to my next point – the importance of perseverance. We've heard the phrase “When the going gets tough, the tough get going”. Perhaps it should be rephrased, “When the going gets tough, the faithful keep going”. You'll remember that chapter 11 of the letter to the Hebrews is full of examples of heroes of the past whose faith kept them going, and this is rounded off with an exhortation at the beginning of chapter 12:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. (*Hebrews 12:1-2 NRSV*)

It's as if the cloud of witnesses from the past are lining the streets, cheering us on as we race past on our marathon. And Jesus himself was the trailblazer, who

looked to the finishing line and the joy that was ahead as he steadfastly endured the cross.

So don't give up! Press on to the finishing line. The whole of heaven is on your side.

The Promises of God

Another source of help and encouragement comes from God's promises in the Bible. This is where getting to know your Bible really pays off when times are hard. There are so many encouraging words and promises in the Bible, and it's really worth learning a few by heart. When the going gets tough they will be with you in your hour of need. There is a selection of Bible verses to learn on the Prayer page on our church website. Why not make it a discipline this Lent to learn one or two verses each week. Here's one of them:

Do not fear, for I am with you,
do not be afraid, for I am your God:
I will strengthen you, I will help you;
I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.
Isaiah 41:10 (NRSV)

As you learn the verse, also meditate on it. With this verse from Isaiah, you could start with the words "do not fear", and acknowledge your feelings of anxiety; then reflect on the promise "I am with you". Then think about the situation that makes you feel weak or powerless, and claim God's promise that "I will strengthen you, I will help you". Finally, visualise the situation you are facing and put your trust in the promise "I will uphold you with my victorious right hand."

Personal Experience

Looking back to our personal experience can also be an encouragement. We might think of special times of feeling God near us, or uplifting experiences, but also our experience of God helping us in times of difficulty. These are all what I would call "glimpses of glory".

The phrase "a glimpse of glory" came into my head as I was thinking about the story of the Transfiguration. On searching for this phrase on the internet, I discovered that *A Glimpse of Glory* is the title of a book by Rick East. This is part of his story, and in particular the incident which gave rise to the book.

Ronald R. (Rick) East was born in March of 1950 in Springfield, Missouri, into a dysfunctional and abusive family environment. Physical disabilities and educational disappointments plagued him throughout his early years. He suffered a devastating blow to his already battered ego when he was involved in a fatality car accident in 1967. It was God who kept him from completing a suicide attempt. A Baptist Bible College student saw Rick's misery and led him to salvation and knowledge of Jesus Christ. A salvation that changed his heart and turned his life

around. If you ask him, he will tell you that he is, just your average guy. "I don't know why God has chosen to communicate with me the way he has. I suppose it is just because I have asked him to so many times and have had a heart felt desire to communicate with Him."

On Christmas Day, 2012 Rick suffered respiratory failure and found himself in Heaven communicating one on one with The Holy Spirit. Rick saw The Holy City of Heaven, New Jerusalem, and was told many things. Rick was instructed to write this book and be a witness to as many people as possible. The Rapid Response Team at Mercy Hospital in Springfield, Missouri revived him and brought him back to this world. Rick did not want to return. The source of his illness has never been determined after 130 tests returned negative results. Within days of discharge from the hospital he was completely recovered.¹

St Paul also writes of an experience of being "caught up to the third heaven" (2 Corinthians 12:2) and hearing secrets that he could not repeat. But he goes on a few verses later to talk about a chronic physical ailment which he suffered from, which he described as his "thorn in the flesh", and how God met him through that as well.

⁸ Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, ⁹ but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. ¹⁰ Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong. (*2 Corinthians 12:8-10 NRSV*)

It's when we feel particularly weak that we are most able to receive strength from God. I've found this many times when feeling anxious about a pastorally sensitive meeting, or about a forthcoming service. Taking a few moments to reflect on God's faithfulness in the past and seeking his strength for the present makes all the difference.

Perspective

The Transfiguration of Jesus was a precious moment in which Peter, James and John had a glimpse of the glory of Jesus, a scary but memorable event which later on made sense in the light of Jesus' later suffering, death and resurrection. They saw Jesus their friend and teacher as the Son of God and the Messiah who was to bring about God's purposes which had been prepared over the course of history, represented by those great characters of the Old Testament, Moses and Elijah. After Jesus' predictions about his suffering, the Transfiguration gave a glimpse of the glory which he would again receive as the risen and ascended Lord.

What's more, the vision of Moses and Elijah, alive and well in the presence of God after their own life's work was finished, must have given the message that

¹ Source: https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/7219525.Rick_East

whatever trials we may face on earth, there is life beyond the grave, just as the resurrection of Jesus also gives us hope of eternity.

We may not be given the kind of *personal experience* that was granted to Peter, James and John, or indeed to St Paul or Rick East, but if we look back to the small ways in which we have experienced God's hand in our lives, and trust God's *promises*, given to us in the Bible, and his ultimate good *purposes* for us and the world, we can be encouraged to *persevere* in faith through the ups and downs and the uncertainties of life. We too can "run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith", and looking to the glory which will one day be revealed, of which we too have been privileged to have glimpses in our own lives.