

Sermon for Ascension, Brandon

Sunday 22nd February 2009

Feast of the Transfiguration

Mark 9:2-10

Steve Edge

Hi! I'm Peter. Most people call me St. Peter, but I would prefer if you just called me Peter. That was the name that The Lord gave me and after all I am just an ordinary bloke. Before the Lord started all that "You are Peter the rock and upon this rock I will build My Church", I was just a fisherman. You can't get much more ordinary than that. Yet Jesus chose me, and a group of other ordinary people, to be his disciples. Ordinary people like me and like you! What I want to talk to you about today is that Jesus chose us, us ordinary people, to reveal things that had been hidden since the very beginning of time. In fact, maybe that's why he chose us, precisely because we are so ordinary. The educated ones, in my day that meant the lawyers and teachers and religious leaders, well, it was harder for them to hear and see what Jesus had to reveal because they thought they already knew everything. It's hard to reveal something to people who think they already know it.

Now, that's not to say that the other disciples and I caught on immediately. We needed a lot of help to come to the point of seeing and hearing what Jesus came to show us. Take, for instance, that time that Jesus took James and John and me up on a mountain. The Transfiguration, I think you call it these days. We were looking at Jesus and all of a sudden it was like he was glowing. His face and His clothes were so bright. And then there were two other people standing with him. I'm not sure how we knew, but we just had the sense that it was Moses and Elijah, two of our greatest prophets, our greatest heroes. Wow! We couldn't believe it! I mean it must have been a holy place, a place of God's revelation. My first thought was to honour the place, to make it a place of worship: "Let's make three shrines," I said to Jesus, "one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." But Jesus, and apparently God, too, would have none of that. Because all of a sudden there was a cloud that hid everything, and a voice that said, "This is my son; listen to Him!" When the cloud lifted, Elijah and Moses were gone, and everything was back to normal. And then to add to our confusion, when we started back down the mountain, Jesus told us not to tell anyone: "Don't tell anyone what you've seen," he said, "until the Son Man has risen from the dead." Risen from the dead?! What on earth did that mean? And what had we seen?! To tell you the truth, I had no idea then what it was we had seen.

Everything had been right to have the greatest moment of our lives. Jesus was shining with God's glory and talking with two of the greatest heroes of our faith, and then, all of a sudden, it was all over. We were walking down the mountain, not having the foggiest idea of what had just happened, and Jesus telling us not to tell anyone. Right, Jesus! We weren't likely to tell anyone, because we ourselves had no idea what had just happened! We had seen and heard something extraordinary, but we didn't have a clue what.

But I want to get back to my point today: that Jesus came to reveal to us things hidden since the beginning of the world. The transfiguration shows that we aren't always ready. James and John and I saw and heard things that day that we weren't ready to see and hear yet. But it also planted the seeds that helped us to know that Jesus was special. That if we kept our eyes and ears peeled to Jesus, perhaps one day we would come to understand.

And what that day of transfiguration finally helped us to understand, was the most important mountaintop event that has ever taken place in this world. That event was, of course, the one that happened on Calvary, another hill, when Jesus was lifted up on the cross outside Jerusalem. That was the true mountaintop experience that we most needed to understand, the one that would reveal things hidden since the beginning. We didn't know it then, but when Jesus' face shone with God's glory on the mountain of transfiguration, it was with the glory of the cross.

'Glory of the cross?' you say. There's a contradiction in terms. Yes, I know it's difficult to understand how the cross could be glorious. It was such a horrible thing! But that's why James and John and I couldn't understand what we had seen at the mountain of transfiguration until after Jesus rose from the dead. Jesus was right to tell us not to tell anyone until then, because we had no hope of understanding it until he rose from the dead. Without that, his cross was just one more terrible tragedy, one more in a long line of God's prophets who were killed. Without the Risen Jesus standing before us, raised by God from the dead, we had no reason to dig deeper and to try to understand this mystery. We had no hope of understanding that the cross reveals things hidden since the very foundation of the world.

I keep mentioning it, so you're probably wondering: what are these things hidden since the beginning of time that the cross reveals? And how is it that the cross reveals God's glory? You who stand almost two thousand years after Easter have the basic picture: Jesus reveals to us that God is love and that God is forgiveness. That's why that hill called Calvary shone

forth with God's glory. Did you know that, if you go to the original Greek and Hebrew words for "glory," that another translation could be "reputation"? We truly get God's reputation right when we look to the cross. We come to see beyond a shadow of a doubt that God is love and God is forgiveness.

But that's the easy part about what Jesus came to reveal, that God is love. The tough part, the thing hidden from us from the beginning of things, is that so many of our other notions about God are wrong. Utterly and completely wrong. We sometimes think, for example, that God is an angry God who punishes people, but we need to ask ourselves, "Is this the God we see in the cross of Jesus?" What we need to understand is that, in the cross, we also get to see who we truly are. And a big part of who we are is that we are people who are constantly making up our own versions of God to fit what we want to do. The gods of our making are made purely to justify the things that we do. And this is the part that's so hard for us to see and to hear. We don't want to recognise that so much of who we think God is, is actually the God of our own making. All those other ideas of God which aren't about love and forgiveness are very probably the gods of our own making, but of course, we don't want to see that now do we?

Let me use my own experience at the transfiguration as an example. I saw Jesus with Elijah and Moses, two great heroes of our people. Now, my first reaction was quite naturally to link Jesus with the God that Elijah and Moses had helped me to know. But I had it all wrong. In fact, I had it completely backwards. Elijah and Moses weren't there that day so that I could see Jesus in terms of their God. No, it's the other way around: they were on that mountain so that James and John and I could begin to see their God in terms of Jesus. We had to see their God in terms of the God that Jesus was showing us. That's why the voice from heaven so clearly said, "Listen to Him!" There were things about God that we had learned from Elijah and Moses that weren't quite right yet, they weren't wrong so much as incomplete, so we needed to listen to and see the God that Jesus would show us. Elijah and Moses were faithful prophets of God, but they still didn't get it quite right. They still tended, like the rest of, to make God in their own image. In other words, to make God to justify what it is that they did.

Let's use Elijah as a quick example. What's the most famous story about Elijah? Isn't it that time he showed up the priests of Ba'al at Mt. Carmel? Do you remember that story? He had the priests of Ba'al build an altar to their god, and Elijah built an altar to his God, and then he had a contest: whoever's altar would be consumed by fire would be worshipping the true God.

And for effect, Elijah even doused his altar with water -- great stuff, almost like a Paul Daniels magic trick. And we know that Elijah, of course, won. His altar was completely consumed by fire. But do we also remember the very end of that story? This is how it ends (1 Kings 18:40):

Elijah said to them, "Seize the prophets of Baal; do not let one of them escape." Then they seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the Wadi Kishon, and killed them there.

Now, Elijah no doubt thought that God wanted him to kill all those prophets. And so did I, until I learned to look back on these things after the resurrection. When Jesus rose from the dead, I had to look at the cross, and God, in a completely different way. Jesus faced people, too, who worshiped a different God than he did. But instead of having those people killed in the end like Elijah, Jesus let them kill him. And then right there on the cross, he forgave them! But when God raised Jesus from the dead, we knew that that's exactly what we had to do too: We had to re-figure all our ideas about God. The God who loves us and forgives us in Jesus could not be the same god whom Elijah thought asked him to kill all those priests. Jesus came to trans-figure our experience of God.

But I want to end with where I began: the Good News that, despite all that, this God of Jesus', asks ordinary people like us to get the word out. Despite our lapses into making God into someone whom God isn't, God forgives us. And God through Jesus Christ shows us the true divine glory in the cross; and then this God asks us to spread the news that we are forgiven and that we can finally get things right. It was an exciting message and call two thousand years ago. And here two thousand years later, this message and call is just as exciting and just as important. Help other people really get to know who God is through Jesus. Help them to give up their ideas that continue to justify violence. The key thing is to remember what that voice told James and John and me up on that mountain, "Listen to Him." Listen to Jesus!

Amen