

Sunday 5th August 2018
First Evensong of the Transfiguration

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Exodus 24.12-end
NT: John 12.27-36a

‘The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days...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.’

‘Then a voice came from heaven...The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, ‘An angel has spoken to him.’

How do we perceive and describe God’s presence in the world, in our lives?

In each of these passages, taken from our readings from the Book of Exodus and the Gospel according to St John, the presence of God is understood as being manifest in dramatic natural phenomena: clouds, fire, thunder, what Romantic-era philosophers refer to as aspects of the sublime, that which is wild, elemental, beyond the control of human beings, untamed by anyone except God, who created all of these things; in other words, God is bad weather. And it is easy to understand why we experience the presence of God in such phenomena, the awesome, powerful God who has the power to create and, seemingly, to destroy. Yet the use of this imagery also points to the unknowableness of God: like the clouds themselves, these are images that obscure, that point to an apophatic conception of God, that is, a God who is beyond the descriptive capabilities of human language and who is, therefore, ultimately beyond the capabilities of human understanding. And I think we can all, to some extent, relate to this conception of God, perhaps especially when we experience moments of almost indescribable joy and indescribable sadness in our own lives and in the lives of others. In some senses, this is a safe conception of God, a place

where we can hide in the obscurity of our smallness in the face of such overwhelming, awesome, unfathomable immensity and unknowableness, a conception that, to some extent, lets us off the hook: God is God – what are we, as mere human beings, meant to do?

In our passages of Scripture, the Israelites, and the crowd listening to Jesus, seem to readily accept the presence of God as manifest through clouds, fire, and thunder, to accept that God is, somehow, both present and hidden: clouds obscure, fire devours and only Moses can hear the voice of God, only Moses can experience God face to face; similarly, the crowd gathered before Jesus hears the voice of God as inarticulate thunder, or as the voice of an angel who they cannot understand as it is not speaking to them. And there is something paradoxical at work here, for, although the crowd is seemingly quick to perceive the manifestation of God's power in the thunder, it does not so quickly recognise the actual presence of God in the incarnation, in the person who is standing before them; as the crowd says: 'Who is this Son of Man?' Jesus seeks to interpret the sign of the thunder for them, indicating who He is and what is to come; but the crowd apparently does not fully comprehend. And we can surely understand this: God's speaking in the thunder and in similar moments during Jesus' Baptism and Transfiguration indicate Jesus' identity as Messiah to the gathered witnesses, but this is, necessarily, only a partial revelation, as this messianic status can, and will, be only fully revealed through Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension. There is, therefore, something preparatory in this reading, as the world is being prepared for the revelation of Jesus as Messiah, for something that is to come, but that is not yet clear. Similarly, the clouds and fire in the passage from Exodus signal a time of preparation before the revelation of God's commandments to the Israelites through Moses; and perhaps we can think of all of this, the Biblical accounts and the times in which we now live, as a longer period of preparation in which our understanding is only partial, before the return of Jesus at the coming of God's kingdom: 'For now we see through a glass darkly; but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.' (1 Cor. 13.12)

However, as with the crowd in the gospel reading, God gives us the chance to understand something in the here and now, as Jesus uses another powerful image drawn from the natural world to describe and explain His significance: light. Jesus acknowledges that there will be darkness in the world and in our lives, but asserts His identity as the light which will not be overcome by the darkness; like light, Jesus is that which is seen and that by which we see. Jesus is the light which allows us to perceive God in that which is right in front of us and all around us, in everyday things, in small acts of love, friendship, kindness, in the lessons of un-kindnesses and hurt, in bread and wine. What came from the sublime obscurity of the cloud and the fire was the law – but the law is fulfilled by the clarifying light of the earthly servant, the Son of Man that is Jesus; the law was partial, but Jesus is fullness, grace, truth and light; where the sublime manifestation obscures, the humble incarnation glorifies. In Christ, God gives us a unique opportunity to be illuminated by the true light, by the light of truth, to see ourselves, those around us, the world, to see all of creation as it truly is; and to see beyond it to eternity, to understand that we will see God, face to face, in unity. The Transfiguration allows us a glimpse of this eternity in our world, of Jesus as the sublime, the transcendent, the Word of Creation, the infinite, but contained and experienced in the ordinary, the earthly, the everyday, the humble, the human, the finite – and the light of the transfigured Jesus illuminates the transcendent in us, the infinite potential in everyone, revealing that we are all called to be children of light, that we are all children of God. So although it is perhaps easy to perceive the presence of God in the sublime light of the blazing sun (because God can be good weather too), we can also understand God's presence in the faces and lives of all those under that sun, allowing the light of Christ to enable us to see Christ's light in them, to experience God in all things.

Louis Johnson