

Matthew 17:1-9 March 6th 2011

The kindly, school inspector walked over to the 6 year old who was painting intently. 'What are you painting?' he asked. Without looking up, the child replied 'God'. 'That will be interesting', said the inspector, 'No-one knows what God looks like'. 'Well,' said the child still painting, 'They soon will'. No-one knows what the face of God is like but many people throughout the ages have experienced God in both the invisible and the visible world.

In the synoptic gospels, the disciples experience God in the transfiguration in a visible way. The season of Epiphany may have passed for us, but here in the transfiguration is another epiphany – or as it is defined, a 'manifestation of the divine'. In the transfiguration, we can see that firstly, God is revealed in some way to the disciples, secondly, that the moment of the transfiguration, the epiphany, is transient, and thirdly, that one effect of an epiphany, a manifestation of the divine, is fear.

Firstly, this Epiphany reveals God to the disciples by showing Jesus as his son. Here is the extraordinary scene of three disciples watching as the powerful figures of Elijah and Moses representing the prophets and the law, appear standing by Jesus on the top of a mountain. Epiphany stories about holy men were common in ancient writing: they bridged the invisible and visible worlds, the future and the present. In a 'timeless moment', the truth is revealed to the disciples and then, eventually, when included later in the gospels, to the whole world. The story echoes distinctly Jesus' baptism: we hear the same words from above – Matthew has even added the last phrase to Mark's version, the phrase 'with whom I am well pleased' so that the words echo exactly those heard at Jesus' baptism: 'This is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased'. In Matthew, God's voice is endorsing to all listeners and readers that *this man* is the one you need to pay attention to – no-one else – 'this is my beloved Son'. Moses and Elijah, two men who also received revelations from God on the top of mountains, steer us towards Jesus - we are now to look to Jesus, the Son of God, who embodies both the law and the prophets, to reveal the living God to us. So firstly then, an epiphany reveals God to the world.

Secondly, an Epiphany is transient. This is a moment for the three disciples to remember – a passing moment to treasure. Yet experiencing God – meeting God

in such a way isn't, and never can be permanent in this world. Peter, the one who always seems to rush where angels fear to tread, is so excited by the vision in front of him that he enthusiastically suggests building a tabernacle. He recognises that the moment is precious – that the meeting of three great figures is from God and so he wants to make it permanent by giving them a place to live together for ever. As is often the case, Peter has made a mistake from which we can all learn: God cannot be contained inside a tabernacle or indeed in any place on earth. And immediately after Peter has spoken, almost as a sign of didactic disapproval, the cloud descends and the voice of God is heard: 'This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased.' Peter learns that such transcendent moments cannot be possessed. Although much of our world seems to be permanent, it changes continually and ultimately cannot be controlled. The essence of transience is perhaps captured by the Norwegian composer who made and composed music for instruments made out of ice, you may have heard his 'echoing' music. When the temperature rises, not only does the music disappear, so do the instruments. In this changing world, we cannot fix God into one place or time. Even the times when we are closest to God are transitory on this earth. The times when we are lost in wonder at the beauty of nature, the moments when we are deep in prayer, the moments when we recognise the invisible world by looking through a glass darkly, the moments of taking the bread and wine and meeting God at the altar - all such experiences are fixed briefly in time. We cannot build a tabernacle, a tent or a brick building to capture them: they are moments of meeting God which move us, which transform us and which inspire us, but they are by their very nature, transient. George Herbert recognised that elusiveness when he spoke of a longing to always feel close to God – he said, I long for 'that which my soul doth *sometimes* feel, it might *forever* feel'. We might long to keep those times we feel closest to God alive permanently, but they are simply not possible to sustain. An Epiphany is transient.

Thirdly, in Matthew, this experience of an epiphany causes fear in the disciples. The disciples were not only overcome with amazement at the transfiguration, they were very afraid. Not surprisingly, when they saw the two Jewish figures who were believed not to have died but to have been taken up to heaven alive and then they heard a voice coming from nowhere, the disciples were full of fear. They fell on their faces terrified, just as Daniel fell on his face before the vision of the heavenly

man. Wouldn't any one of us be equally alarmed at seeing two famous holy men from the past, standing with Jesus or at realising we were standing in God's presence. Later, when Jesus struggles with his own fear in the Garden of Gethsemane, the same three disciples will be overcome with tiredness and fall asleep- the very time when Jesus needed them most. Though no-one was there in Gethsemane, to take away Jesus' fear, here, the fear of the disciples vanishes when Jesus touches them and he says those words familiar to us from visiting angels, 'Get up and do not be afraid'. Just as Jesus' healing touch helped the blind to see and the sick to become well, so his touch takes away the disciple's fear as they respond to the transfiguration.

This scene of the transfiguration, assures us that Jesus is the fulfilment of the law and prophets and confirms to us that Jesus really is from God. The disciples are told by Jesus to tell no-one about the experience – one wonders if anyone would have believed such a strange story – but they must keep silent until after the resurrection. Only then, will they understand as they see Jesus shining in the light, yet another epiphany. For the disciples this was an experience of closeness to God, it was a transitory experience and it was one where they were afraid. We look on at the scene, experiencing third hand the epiphany.

So what is there for us, all these years later from this unusual scene? We don't see Jesus standing with Moses and Elijah transfigured on the top of any mountain. We are living in 2011 in the North West of England. What about us? Well, there may not be transfiguration scenes but there are epiphanies for us too – there are places, sometimes called 'thin places' where somehow God seems more accessible - where we seem to grasp that Jesus really is the son of God - places such as Iona or some cathedrals and churches. There are moments when we are transported, maybe by the choir as they sing with perfection the sanctus or maybe in the silence when we are still and know, as the psalmist says, 'I am God' and that Jesus is God's son. Maybe the volunteers have such an experience when carrying out their work in this cathedral. There are moments that pass – moments of transience. There are moments such as looking at a sleeping child, moments when heaven breaks through the veil of this world and we recognise that, in the words of Isaiah, 'the earth is full of his glory'. There are times when we realise that such epiphanies are in fact the 'real world'. Edwin Muir, the poet, said, 'That was the real world: I have touched it once, and now shall know it always.' Sometimes an

Epiphany can explicitly involve fear. If you have ever been on a mountain alone and looked across craggy, snowy summits for miles and miles stretching towards the distant sky, then you may have experienced both a sense of intimacy with God as well as a great fear of being very alone and totally insignificant: such is the awesome nature of God

Any Epiphany is a gift to be received with amazement, humble thanks and sometimes fear, and then – and then....then it transforms us into the people God wants us to become.

I'd like to finish with a prayer inspired by Janet Morley which captures the purpose of our baptism, the transience of our experience of God and releases us from fear. Let us pray,

Holy God

Whose presence is known in the personal structures we build around ourselves and also in their collapse;

Establish in us a loving community of hope,

Not to contain your mystery

But to be led beyond security

Into your sacred space and loving presence, through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen