

Wheatley United Reformed Church
Sunday 7 February 2016
Exodus 34.29-35; Psalm 99; 2 Cor.3.12-4.2; Luke 9.28-36 (43a)

Once upon a time you could tell a proper Englishman anywhere by his stiff upper lip. This remarkable ability to speak only with the bottom side of the mouth does seem to have been gender-specific. It would be interesting to know, given current controversies, whether or not Cecil Rhodes cultivated one. But this physical phenomenon was most often a metaphor for a kind of stoicism, bearing whatever outrages life threw at you and refusing to let them show, at least in public. It was especially favoured during the heyday of Empire but has been in steep decline since then. Now we kiss each other when we meet, which in days gone by was done only by the French, who were experts in amorous behaviour; and we are encouraged to emote at the slightest opportunity and mourn departed celebrities whom we never met as if they were our best friends. Polite forms of address have fallen out of fashion in favour of first names, because we have forgotten how, like the familiar second-person in some languages, they were only to be used in the context of close relationships. All is not lost, however. I notice that some people you have to deal with on the phone have now been trained to ask what they should call you, no doubt because of the grumpy responses they have received. I leave you to guess what my response is when asked if they should call me Colin or Mr Thompson. Only if I am very irked do I say 'neither'.

Now that we have more or less abandoned the stiff upper lip, there's at least one bonus. You can tell a lot about how someone is feeling simply by looking at them, especially if you know them well. You can see it in their faces. I was rather taken aback some years ago, while pursuing some research in a particularly wonderful spot overlooking Lake Como, to be told by one of the other scholars whom I had just met that she could see my aura. In those days she was vaguely Buddhist in a Californian way; subsequently, she has embraced Christianity. At least it wasn't a halo, as that would have been deeply disturbing and highly inappropriate. Speaking of which, have you ever wondered when you look at a painting of a saint with a halo or any kind of unearthly light coming down from heaven if those who painted the scene thought that

if they had been there they would have witnessed the phenomenon? Could haloes, in other words, actually be seen by the naked eye, if you had happened to walk in on a saint in the middle of some ecstatic experience?

The answer is surely 'no'. In the coded language of such paintings light is used as a symbol for an individual's holiness, that is, for the light of Christ which shone through their words and their deeds. The language of the Bible is coded in a similar way: mountains, clouds, heavenly light, the voice that speaks from above, are ways of talking about the sudden and unexpected moment when God reveals himself, from Moses on mount Sinai receiving the Law to the mount of Transfiguration. Ordinary words are inadequate to describe this, because the experience seems beyond their reach. Instead, the language of symbolism, of familiar things which point to unfamiliar truths, comes into play, as it does for all the deepest and most searching human experiences: most of all, love and loss. One of the great things about language like this is that invites us into its mysterious world. It doesn't simply say 'this is what happened and how', but in this case, like Moses at the burning bush, 'tread carefully, for this is holy ground'. If we get fixated on shining faces and dazzling brightness and treat them in a simplistic, literal way we shall actually miss what it is the Bible is trying to say to us.

You might think that in the face of a revelation of the kind they witnessed, when the appearance of the Jesus they knew so well was transformed before their eyes, the disciples would have been thrilled. Instead, they were bewildered. It simply didn't fit their experience and they were at a loss to understand. Whereas the vision is told in a highly symbolic way, their reaction is all too human. That is what interests me today, and I find in it two important biblical truths. The first is that there is always more to learn about this Jesus than we imagine, and the second, that any powerful experience of the divine will throw us into confusion. There are many people today who admire the teaching of Jesus for its radical edge, its challenge to vested interests, its concern for the poor and the outsider. But they find all the doctrinal apparatus which the Church has attached to him impossible to accept. Why, they ask, must we take all that on board? Why can't we just follow him as a great teacher? Why do we have to turn this charismatic Galilean teacher into a Saviour who suffers, dies, rises and ascends as

God incarnate? I sympathize. The Church gives the impression, whether it means to or not, that the doctrines are more important than the person, and that's the wrong way round. When Jesus called his first disciples he did not ask them to sign up to doctrinal statements about himself; he only said 'Follow me'. The first and most important decision anyone can make is to try to do just that. As we do, we usually find that the doctrine will take care of itself.

There is a time in our own process of growing up when childish certainties give way to confusion, usually during adolescence. The world stops being a playground and starts to become a much less secure place. If we were fortunate enough to enjoy a happy upbringing there's a sense, in biblical terms, of our own expulsion from Eden and our entry into a harder world, which includes the knowledge that we must one day die. I say 'if' because all too many children know only a world of suffering and loss: imagine what it must be like to be born in a refugee camp or have to flee for your life with your parents, and endure hunger and cold. They never experience the garden, only the thorns and thistles and harsh realities of the wilderness. One way or another, there is a parallel process of growing up in discipleship and faith. As children we ask 'Did it happen like that?' but as adults the question is different: 'What does it mean?' Here, faced with something about the man Jesus who has been such an inspiration to them, their childish certainties fall away and, though they do not know it and might wish it were not so, they are being called to take the next step on the journey of faith, into darker and more disturbing territory, which is the only way towards spiritual maturity.

We have chosen journeying as our theme for the year, so this story is illuminating. For some fortunate people, especially in the first flush of faith, following Jesus is a joyful and transformative experience. But there comes a time in every disciple's life when he or she has to embrace the way of the Cross; that is, come to terms with the fact that things do not turn out as they should and that human beings are capable of doing terrible things to one another. That is the point at which the disciples of Jesus began to feel a bit lost, so it's hardly surprising that we do too. The Jesus who told such wonderful stories and made people who thought they were shut out feel included in God's love has stirred up opposition. Politically, his popularity threatens to

provoke the Roman occupiers. Theologically, his teaching poses a direct challenge to the way the religious authorities ran the show. He has stirred something up and they are going to fight back. In the moment of transfiguration the disciples see that their teacher is something more than simply a good man. He is conversing with the greatest figures of their faith, Moses the law-giver and Elijah the prophet, who was believed to reappear before the Messiah came; and here he is. They cannot see him in the same way again. They are bewildered, but they sense that in this Jesus something is going on which far transcends the familiar people and places of Galilee.

Why should we expect anything different in our own discipleship? What makes us think that we should be having an easy ride, when they did not? After the Transfiguration Jesus starts to allude more openly to his coming death and resurrection, and the disciples are bothered. They liked the Jesus who taught and healed and upset the high and mighty and they would settle for more of that. Why is he so insistent that he must confront his critics in Jerusalem? On the mountain they have glimpsed something which hints that he is more than an inspiring teacher, but they have no idea what that might be. But the question of what his true purpose is now becomes more pressing. For in setting his face towards Jerusalem and its Temple he is telling them and us that he must not only treat the symptoms of the human condition and its tendency towards destructive behaviour, as he has all through his ministry; he must eradicate the disease and become the cure. As Lent moves into Passiontide the drama will unfold, in terms of a clash between our way of self-preservation at all costs and his insistence that the only way for God to overcome evil is to let it exact its price and show that love will always be the stronger; tortured, yes, crucified and buried; but in the end, when all the baying for blood is done, simply, quietly, wonderfully, there.

Before the Gospels were written down, St Paul already saw Christ not as a local hero but as a cosmic figure whose work was no less than the reconciliation of the world to God. In Christ God is addressing the cause of the wounds which disfigure our humanity: our cruelty and selfishness, the injustices ingrained in society, our persecutions and wars. For there can be no hope of salvation for anyone, let alone a world, unless there is a cure for the evil in human hearts which is still the cause of so

much suffering. That is the place to which his disciples must come if they are truly to embrace the Christian way, and not for nothing is it called the way of the Cross. Christian living mirrors this journey. One of the early Greek Fathers, Gregory of Nyssa, pondered the three visions Moses had of God, at the burning bush, on mount Sinai, and hidden in the cleft of a rock. His conclusion is a surprising but an important one: 'Moses' vision of God began with light; afterwards God spoke to him in a cloud. But when Moses rose higher and became more perfect, he saw God in the darkness'. On the mount of Transfiguration the disciples have come to the second stage, for they see Jesus radiant for a moment before a cloud covers them all. It marks a moment of transition, but there remains that place of darkness in Gethsemane and on Calvary. How is it that the highest vision of divine love is to be found there? That is the question with which we are invited to grapple in the coming weeks.

It is always the other way round for us: clouds and darkness are images of doubt ignorance and light is what we crave – certainty, assurance, clarity as we travel. As we climb the mount of Transfiguration we encounter both: the light which shines in the face of Jesus and the cloud which removes him from our sight. The same will happen again, at his ascension. We see and we do not see; we understand and we do not understand; we journey, but each time we reach our destination we discover that the journey, though still incomplete, is taking us ever closer to the One who both accompanies us on the way and is our final goal.