

**Sermon for Romsey and Lancefield**  
**Transfiguration, 14<sup>th</sup> of February 2010**

**Luke 9:28-36**

I feel as though I should apologise for today's sermon up-front. Today we celebrate the Transfiguration, the revelation of God in Jesus. It is, literally, a mountaintop experience, in which the separation of earth from heaven is overcome by the presence of Jesus. We know that we're on the border of heaven because we're on a mountain, the traditional site of revelations of God; because Jesus' clothes have become dazzling white, the colour of light itself; and because Elijah and Moses, representing the prophets and the law, are present. God spoke to both Elijah and Moses on a mountain;<sup>1</sup> their presence here confirms for Peter, James and John that on this mountain they're seeing God. Moses had to veil his face after speaking to God, but in Jesus the veil that normally hides God from human sight has been removed. Today we celebrate that theophany, that revelation of God, standing with Peter, James and John on the mountaintop. But I preached on that last year, and today I actually want to focus on the valleys. Hence my apology for this sermon, which won't be as celebratory as you might expect on a feast day.

Faith brings joy and certainty and celebration, but it also brings difficulty and doubt and sorrow. That's something we often have trouble with. We think that our relationship with God should be all mountaintop, all glory and light and an intense sense of the presence of God. When there are shadows and doubts, when we can't feel the presence of God around us, we think something is wrong, either with us, or with God. Instead, all that's happened is that our journey of faith has taken us down from the mountain onto the plain, or into a valley. Fortunately, when we experience this, when for whatever reason God seems far away from us, we can turn for wisdom to the many Christians who've been there before.

One description of the low times comes from the desert fathers, the monks who in the third and fourth centuries went to live in the deserts of Egypt, giving up everything to live simple lives of prayer and work, living entirely for God. Their greatest temptation was what was called the sin of *acedia*, something like sloth, a feeling of listlessness, an inability to either work or pray. This is how one of the fathers described it:

First of all [the demon of *acedia*] makes it seem that the sun barely moves, if at all, and that the day is fifty hours long. Then he constrains the monk to look constantly out the windows, to walk outside the cell, to gaze carefully at the sun to determine how far it stands from [lunchtime], to look this way and now that to see if perhaps [one of the brethren appears from his cell]. Then too he instils in the heart of the monk a hatred for the place, a hatred for his very life itself, a hatred for manual labour ... This demon drives him along to desire other sites where he can more easily procure life's necessities, more readily find work and make a real success of himself. He goes on to suggest that, after all, it is not the place that is the basis of pleasing the Lord. God is to be adored everywhere ...<sup>2</sup>

And so on, and so forth. I suspect that people, men and women, because there were also desert mothers, took to the desert in a fire of commitment and sacrifice, certain that there they would live close to God, experiencing God's glory. But even those people who gave their entire lives up to worshipping and working for God found themselves experiencing times of isolation and spiritual dryness. The way to get through it, the desert fathers and mothers knew, was just to keep working and worshipping, not surrendering to the 'demon' of *acedia* by giving up their commitment.

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 24:17, 1 Kings 19:11-13.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Kathleen Norris, *The Noontday Demon*, Oxford: Lion, 2008, p. 13.

Some sixteen hundred years after the desert fathers, C. S. Lewis wrote *The Screwtape Letters*, a series of letters from a senior to a junior devil, giving advice on how the junior could tempt his human. The senior devil said of humans:

[Humans] nearest approach to constancy ... is undulation ... a series of troughs and peaks. If you had watched your patient carefully you would have seen this undulation in every department of his life – his interest in his work, his affection for his friends, his physical appetites, all go up and down. As long as he lives on earth periods of emotional and bodily richness and liveliness will alternate with periods of numbness and poverty.<sup>3</sup>

Then the senior devil, Screwtape, gives the junior devil, Wormwood, some advice on how to make use of the naturally occurring low periods: “Do not let him suspect the law of undulation. Let him assume that the first ardours of his conversion might have been expected to last, and ought to have lasted, forever, and that his present dryness is an equally permanent condition.”<sup>4</sup> Then, says Screwtape, you can suggest that his faith was just a phase, and get him to give up on it, or that the lowness he’s feeling now is the way he should always feel and that his experiences of joy and his life-changing commitments were excessive.

Maybe Screwtape and Wormwood have been successful. We don’t like any part of our lives to be mundane or boring or difficult, and we especially don’t like it in our faith. We want our relationship with God to be all mountain, all the time. Up there on the mountain, Peter said to Jesus, ‘Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah’, but Luke tells us that Peter didn’t know what he was saying. They couldn’t stay on the mountain, seeing God in the glory that shone from Jesus. They had to come down from the mountain, and not just back onto the plain, but into the valley of the shadow of death.

In the church year we celebrate the Transfiguration immediately before we celebrate Ash Wednesday, with its reminder that we are dust and to dust we will return. Before we get to the glory of the resurrection we go not only through the horror of the crucifixion, but through the forty days of Lent, days of dullness and dryness, days without flowers in our churches, days in which we give up otherwise insignificant items to remind ourselves that we can live without ‘things’. At theological college our Professor of Worship refused to light the Christ candle during Lent and when we asked him why, pointing out that God was still present in Lent, he said that otherwise we wouldn’t be properly able to appreciate the joy when the candle is lit again on Easter as the resurrection is celebrated.

The highs and lows of the church year, the feasts and fasts and weeks of ordinary time, reassure us that it’s okay to have highs and lows in our faith. There will be mountaintop experiences. There will be valleys of shadow. Sometimes the living water will flow freely; sometimes it will seem that the spring has dried up. Those on the mountains can rejoice, without feeling superior about those whose relationship with God is for the moment less glorious. Those in the valleys can be comforted, without feeling that those on the mountains are being extreme in their faith.

From the mountain on which Jesus, Peter, James and John stand, we can see the joy of the resurrection, when again the veil between heaven and earth will be taken away and in Jesus we’ll see the glory of God. But before we get there we have Ash Wednesday, Lent, Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. Highs, lows and everything in between. This is what life is like, and it’s also what it means to be Christian. Don’t let Screwtape and Wormwood convince us otherwise.

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<sup>3</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, London: Fontana, 1959, p. 45.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.