

Dazzling

Exodus 34:29-35; Luke 9:28-36

One of the loveliest things I heard about someone the other day was, 'whenever you went to see her, she always smiled and her smile lit up the room'. It's a wonderful description, and I am sure we can all think of a person for whom that is true. The warmth of their personality, the inclusiveness of their mind, the goodness of their heart breaking out in a wonderful smile.

There are times: a baptism, a wedding, even a funeral where that light also shines. Where the hope, or the love, or the fond remembering breaks out into our world and shines and makes us feel better.

There are pieces of music, or writing and drama, or the appearance of the first buds on the trees and the first flowers in the garden, where that wonder and joy and happiness breaks out into our world and shines and makes us feel better.

There are moments in the life of our country when light breaks out upon us. Band Aid, in the 1980s, highlighting the desperate need to feed the world, and address issues of drought and starvation in Africa. Children in Need, and the late, lamented Sir Terry Wogan, raising millions of pounds for children in this and other countries for whom life is grim and joyless.

There are moments in history when light breaks out on the world. The dismantling of the Berlin Wall. The release of Nelson Mandela from years of incarceration, and the fitful process of change in South Africa that has led to the gradual dismantling of apartheid. The signing of the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland that heralded the beginning of a change in that troubled part of the United Kingdom.

From the personal to the international, light shines. There are dazzling moments that point to better things, better places and better people. The dazzling light that transfigures the world, and transfigures us. I don't know that it matters which influences first. So long as that bright change happens, to us, in us, because of us, despite us, around us.

In Luke's gospel, "the transfiguration story appears as a moment of reassurance to the disciples, who are anxious about their future. After hearing predictions about how Jesus will be rejected by the authorities and put to death, the disciples experience a sense of doom and gloom."ⁱ Was the mission they were engaged in going to end in failure? Were they going to die too? What was the point in believing?

This mountain-top experience must have, even if only momentarily, brought a sense of relief from the doom and gloom. It suddenly vanishes, and out of the darkness the disciples see this sparkling, shining, dazzling Jesus. In this vivid imagery, (is it a parable?) Moses, the law-giver, and Elijah, the greatest of the prophets, stand with Jesus, emphasising the passing on of God's message from the old to the new. In Jesus, God's message floods the world with light.

The story overwhelms. It is meant to do so. Out of the despair, hope. Out of the aimlessness, direction. Out of the darkness, light. The response is awe, and silence, and gratitude.

Many of us are dismayed by the ongoing and unspeakable awfulness of the refugee crisis – this tide of misery and desperation breaking over the continent of Europe from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and many African countries. In the Calais camp, known as The Jungle, it was reported that French authorities wanting to clear the site have destroyed the church and the mosque. Where was the dazzling light there? In the plans to rebuild, and still believe. And also in the world beginning to realise that a solution to this problem is going to be costly, and needs an answer not only for the migrants in Europe, but also for the peoples in those lands who have no hope left. Will the world show that it cares? And how? Light must come. Who will bring it?

In the places where you work, where ethics can sometimes feel compromised because of the recession; where corners are cut; where people are sometimes treated with a little less respect; where we allow differences, petty or significant, to cloud judgement and blur our best intentions; where it is hard to maintain the boundaries between right and wrong and apply what your Christian faith expects of you in a world that is often indifferent to belief. Light must come. Who will bring it?

In your relationships, wherever they are formed, and whatever their nature might be. When it's hard to like someone let alone love them; when your perception of who someone is has been blotted out by what they have done; when snap judgements become more important than reasoned assessment; when first chances aren't given, let alone second; where you cannot see the present, let alone the future, because of the past. Light must come. Who will bring it?

The powerfulness of the story of transfiguration comes not simply through what it tells us and shows us about Jesus – that His dazzling presence reveals for any who might look that here is God's chosen One, God's beloved. Also, it is by the light of that self-same transfiguration that we too are illuminated.

If you stand next to Jesus, in the light, in His dazzling light, then chances are you will shine too. In the story of the transfiguration we catch a glimpse of glory, and part of that glory is because of the light coming from Jesus, we might be glorious too. Unlikely? Far-fetched? Well, look at the disciples who play a part in the story – they almost sleep through the transfiguration. They were sleepy on the mountain where Jesus shone gloriously, just as they were sleepy in Gethsemane when Jesus was at His darkest ebb. But here, on the mountain, they woke up in time. And heavy-lidded though they were, slow of understanding though they were, something of that glory sparked into the souls of those men, and it stayed with them. Years later, they remembered. They had been transfigured too.

“The transfiguration of Jesus offers a glimpse of what is possible, not only for Jesus, but for all humanity.”ⁱⁱ Desmond Tutu has said, “We are each made for goodness, love and compassion. Our lives transformed as the world is when we live these truths.”

So it is with this story of the Transfiguration. Sparks of its light still shower down upon us today. When we catch ourselves, even through faith-sleepy eyes, in a different light. When we realise, much to our surprise, embarrassment, or amazement, that not only are we capable of doing and being and saying the right thing, we are also shaped to do and be and say these things and it comes more naturally to us than we might have imagined.

Transfiguration shows not only what we might be, or can be; it shows us what we are, and who we are. Standing close to the dazzling Jesus, we too, through our kindness, through our generosity, through our thoughtfulness, through our imagination, through our graciousness, are much better than we frequently give ourselves credit.

Yes, the bad stuff is still there: the negativity; the laziness; the hyper-criticism and all the rest of it. Transfiguration tells us that that is not the real people we are. Transfiguration helps us see Jesus differently, and that is truly awesome. And transfiguration helps us see ourselves differently, and that is truly awesome too. We are so much more, for we are so much brighter.

And that, on dark February days, gives us hope.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

ⁱ J Paul Rajashekar, Feasting on the Gospels, Luke Vol 1, p268

ⁱⁱ Lori Brand Hale, Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol1 p454