

Sunday next before Lent(B) - A Thing of Beauty

We've just had two readings this morning that tell of two astonishing moments when the unimaginable brightness of heaven touches the grit of our everyday earthly lives. First, we heard about the great prophet Elijah on the road with his follower Elisha. They travel from one place to the next, no doubt footsore and dusty and hungry. It's easy to imagine that much of that time spent tramping down the road was the usual experience of long journeys: daydreaming about ending the day with a big meal and a soft bed, or musing about what your family or friends might be doing back home at this moment, or engaging in irritable little squabbles with companions over trivial things. It's hard to spend such a long time on a journey and keep your mind completely focused on the sacred nature of the task God has given you. So I imagine their journey had elements of these very earthly distractions.

But then the astonishing happens: it becomes apparent that Elijah's task is done and it's time for him to say goodbye. He quite literally passes the mantle on to Elisha as he is caught up to heaven in a chariot of fire. Now, if you're Elisha watching this, there's no doubt that what is happening is a moment of heaven breaking in on earthly life which only he gets to see. Even though he is distressed at letting Elijah go, he has been told that being witness to this extraordinary moment means that he has been given the spirit that Elijah had, that he is now expected to assume the mantle.

And it's the same for the three disciples in our Gospel reading. Peter, James, and John were singled out by Jesus to go with him up the mountain, and only they are witnesses to another astonishing moment, this moment when Jesus is transfigured and they see in this seemingly ordinary man the brightness of God. For a moment, heaven breaks in on earth at the top of this mountain, and the disciples are understandably completely out of their depth trying to make sense of it all. Commentaries like to give Peter

a hard time about the seemingly impulsive way he tends to blurt things out in this kind of situation, but really Peter's first reaction is quite right. He says, 'Rabbi, it is good for us to be here.' And the word he uses for "good" in Greek is καλον...which is specifically the kind of meaning of good that is associated with beauty...so it might be more accurate to translate what he said as 'Rabbi, it is a thing of beauty for us to be here.' Right away, he's gotten at the heart of situation; he's understood that they have been witnesses to the very presence of God as revealed in Jesus, and what they have witnessed is beauty in its purest form, the beauty of heaven.

Now, one could argue that this beauty had been there all along...the person of Jesus hadn't changed in this moment of transfiguration, it was just that for a little while his outward appearance showed the full power of his inner light. But notice what these particular disciples had to do in order to see the true nature of this rabbi with whom they'd been tramping along the road for all this time. They had to separate themselves from the everyday distractions and squabbles and ordinariness of journeying with the crowd. They had to go to a remote place where they couldn't hear any of that and Jesus could have their complete attention. Only then are their eyes opened to this thing of beauty.

And then, if you continue reading in Mark's Gospel account, you'll see what happens next. They come down off the mountain with Jesus and are immediately plunged back into the mess and the muddle of human beings trying to sort out their own problems. While they've been gone, a man has come asking for help for his epileptic son and the other disciples have been trying unsuccessfully to cure him. At the same time this moment of revelation is happening on the mountaintop, there is an all too familiar scene happening down in the valley of a panicky father trying anything he can think of to help his beloved son and getting more and more desperate as he sees no one around is able to help him. The disciples are caught up in the drama and the desperation and trying to fix things themselves but

not getting anywhere. It's not until Jesus comes back on the scene that he is able to calm things down and heal the boy.

But notice the elements that these two readings about Elijah and about the transfiguration have in common. As I said at the beginning, they are both about moments of transcendence breaking into ordinary human existence. We had a routine when I worked at Bristol Cathedral: like a lot of cathedrals these days, we usually celebrated communion in the main part of the church around what is commonly referred to as a "nave altar". But the day before Ash Wednesday, we would remove this table and clear the way so that throughout Lent, the congregation would make the much longer trek up through the choir to receive communion at the more permanent high altar. You can picture this if you've noticed the same set-up at Norwich Cathedral. But if you think about it, that's a very long walk from a seat in the back of the nave all the way up to the altar rail at the east end. So one day a visiting bishop asked a canon why we did that...to which she replied "Imminence and transcendence". What she meant was that during most of the year, our focus at communion was the astonishing truth that what we are celebrating is Jesus being right here in our midst... the imminence of God. But every once in awhile, we have to remind ourselves that Jesus isn't just some ordinary guy who gives awfully good advice, he's the actual Incarnation of God, God in human form, and without him, God would be completely unapproachable...the transcendence of God.

But we can't get to know Jesus, we can't approach God, unless we separate ourselves from the mess and the muddle and trying to fix our own problems. Now that doesn't mean completely cutting ourselves off from the world around us as if somehow as Christians we are immune to everyone else's problems. We have a responsibility of care for those around us...we can't pretend we are too good to be pulled into the grit of human suffering. But it does mean we have to approach these cares differently. We have to find ways to go up the mountain, to seek out those

moments of beauty by giving God the opportunity to break into our lives. We're about to start the season of Lent, and there is no better time to cultivate this habit of finding at least a bit of time every day for prayer and reading Scripture. Because if we seek to encounter Jesus in those moments, we can be sure he will accompany us back down the mountain to help us through the problems we have in the valley. We don't have to literally go off and climb a mountain like the disciples or trudge along miles of dusty road like Elisha, we can climb a spiritual mountain in the time it takes to say a prayer and the end of a work day is a long enough trudge to be a journey...but if we take that moment and look for that beauty, it happens time and time again: the unimaginable brightness of heaven touches the grit of our everyday earthly lives