

I really do enjoy preaching. It's one of the highlights of my week to look at the passages on a Monday morning for the forthcoming Sunday, and study them, and to see what they might be saying, how I can bring out their meaning. But sometimes, the whole process can be very frustrating, as it was this week. It's the week before Lent, my mind's starting to turn towards Easter. I've got loads of extra talks and things I have to prepare. When I saw the gospel set for today, I thought, "Great, story of the transfiguration. I've preached on that a number of times. I'll pull out a file, a sermon from the file, and I'll have all this extra time this week to work on my other talks."

I thought, "I know this sermon, the transfiguration. It's a story about the revelation of Jesus's glory. All that sermon prep time I'm going to save this week just by drawing on a sermon that I preached even in August when this story of the transfiguration last came up." So I got out my files, prepared to talk about the glory of Jesus in the transfiguration, bringing out the theme of the collect, which you may remember. It talks about Jesus revealing his glory on the holy mountain. And I just checked the gospel before putting my ready prepared sermon on the side of my desk while I got on with other things when I noticed that something that upset my plan.

I read it again, this story we've heard from Saint Mark's gospel, and my heart sank. Mark makes no mention of the glory in that reading. We've heard the word mentioned many times already in this service through what we've sung, what we've heard, what we've said together, but it's not a word that features in that gospel from Saint Mark. And the more I read it, the more I looked in other translations, it never turned up. It's in Luke's gospel, which I spoke about in August. When he records the story of the transfiguration, he says that the disciples saw Jesus's glory. But Mark doesn't say that. He hints at it with this reference to the clothes of Jesus becoming dazzling white, but he doesn't say that the glory of Jesus was revealed in this moment.

So my sermon from August had to stay on the side of my desk and I had to start again. I needed to

write a new sermon talking about what was distinctive about these readings, not the similar ones of the same version we get in other readings, like the ones I had in August. And of course, the irony is that two of the other readings today do refer to Jesus's glory, or to glory. The Psalm says that God reveals himself in glory. That's a big Old Testament theme. Throughout the Old Testament, God comes to his people, his presence is always veiled by a cloud, or sometimes fire, as in the story from the Old Testament. And his glory is what can be apprehended of the presence of God.

And in our epistle today, Saint Paul too talks about glory. He takes this Old Testament theme in a whole new direction. But I'll return to that later. But there's no mention of glory in the gospel. Why is that? Well, the clue might be in how our gospel begins. It starts, you'll notice, six days later, which begs the question, what happened six days earlier? Well, six days earlier, Jesus had been identified by Peter at Caesarea Philippi for the first time as the messiah. And straight away, as soon as Peter recognizes who Jesus is, there's a shift in the teaching of Jesus, and he starts to talk about the cross to tell them that he would suffer and die.

And in the passage just before the one we've heard, Jesus tells his followers that if they wanted to become his followers, they would have to deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow him, that those who wanted to save their lives would have to lose it. "What would it profit," he asks, "If you gained the whole world and forfeit your life? Those who are ashamed of Jesus and his words, of him or her, Jesus also will be ashamed." Hard sayings, tough words, denial, cross, loss, shame. But here, on top of the mountain, six days later, we have what appears to be the antidote, the opposite of such gloom.

Jesus has changed into a figure of dazzling white brightness, with two Old Testament superstars in attendance. This looks like triumph, not defeat, splendor and success, not failure and loss. And these two passages need to be held together: This talk of the cross and the taking up our cross to follow Jesus, and this appearance of Jesus on the mountain top. They're a pair. Mark puts them

together. And together, they're the hinge around which the whole gospel functions. They're right in the middle of the gospel. If we're to understand Mark's accounts of this story on the mountaintop of the transfiguration, we need to see it with its other half.

It's part of Jesus's teaching on the cross. Jesus is most ... Mark would have us see is that Jesus is at his most glorious, not on the mountain, but on the cross, which is an amazing thought, which is a long way from the kind of glory enjoyed this week by the Philadelphia Eagles for instance. But Mark is not alone in making such a bold claim. John's gospel talks of Jesus being lifted high on the cross. What we see in Mark's account of the transfiguration when put in a proper context is that the exalted lord is never to be separated from the crucified lord. The mountain of transfiguration is to be seen as one with Golgotha's Hill.

The transfiguration, the story we see from the mountain top, gives three disciples a glimpse of Jesus's true nature. Whereas when Jesus is lifted up high on the cross, his glory is revealed for all the world to see. So it's a distinctive understanding of Jesus and his glory. And I want to go on and say something about how our epistle shows how Saint Paul develops our understanding of what this word glory is all about. And Saint Paul in that reading from 2 Corinthians writes what I think is one of the most amazing and powerful verses in the Bible.

He writes this, that, "God gives the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." And this is a dramatic development of the Old Testament teaching about God's glory. In the Old Testament, as I've mentioned, the divine presence is always veiled in cloud or fire. Only Moses, we're told, is able to encounter God face to face. But in the New Testament, in the coming of Jesus, Paul says we can see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. He doesn't say, "The glory of God in a sunrise," or any other great natural wonder, but, "God's glory shining in the face of Jesus Christ."

This is very particular. The knowledge of God's glory comes in this face. It's particular, and

personal. What could be more personal? When we think of someone, anyone, whether we're particularly close to them or not, when we conjure them up in our mind, we recall their face. That's what captures who they really are. That's what's most personal about them. And what this first emphasizes is that when we think of God, when we start to try to comprehend of God, of the divine, we're to begin with this person, this face. That's where the revelation of God is most complete. That's where he reveals himself in the clearest form.

When God chose to make himself known to humankind, he revealed himself in the person of Jesus Christ. He didn't send a letter. He didn't send a messenger. He came himself in the person of Jesus, with a unique face and story and history attached. Jesus says in John's Gospel, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the father." That's an amazing thought. Christianity invites us to conceive of the ultimate in the face of a person, the face of Jesus Christ. And I think as we get older, we tend to drift into thinking of God in more and more abstract terms. We imagine God as some impersonal, floating spirit.

It's our children who dare to picture God with a face, to speak of God like Moses did, as a friend. And before I finish, I want to say one more thing about how Saint Paul develops this theme of glory. And staying in that book of 2 Corinthians, he writes this a bit later on. "And all of us with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another, for this comes from the lord, the spirit."

And if you were here last week, we sang a great hymn based on that verse, Wesley's wonderful hymn, "Love Divine All Loves Excelling," which comes to this great climax in the final verse. These are the words we sang. "Finish then thy new creation, pure and sinless let us be. Let us see thy great salvation, perfectly restored in thee. Changed from glory into glory, till in heaven we take our place, till we cast our crowns before thee, lost in wonder, love, and praise." Wesley's reflection on this amazing verse from Saint Paul, bringing out

this wonderful fact that we too are somehow changed from glory to glory.

indeed the rest of our lives, we do what we can to work towards that end.

In fact, the words Saint Paul uses in this verse for transform, in the sense that we are transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. That's the only time that Saint Paul uses the words that the gospel uses for transfigure. It's the same word that Paul uses, of what happens to Jesus on the mountain top, is the promise held before us that we too will be transformed by the work of God's spirit. We too, by the spirit's work, are undergoing our own transformation.

Amen.

And as we head into Lent, that's the thought I want to leave with you. Lent can too easily be reduced to a time where we simply give up something, like chocolate or wine. We spend the whole six weeks battling this ridiculous temptation to have a bar of Hershey's or whatever. Why don't we instead think bigger? Be more ambitious? Why don't we look to open ourselves up more and more to the spirit of God? So that we can encourage this process of transformation, that we might be those whom God by his spirit transforms from one degree of glory to another. Don't feel that you have to give up something for Lent. Take something on.

Take something on which will facilitate this process of transformation -- maybe a spiritual practice, which brings us closer to God. And if you want to learn more about spiritual practices, Rebecca's formation course in Lent, which starts on this Wednesday ... Not this Wednesday, the week after, is about spiritual practices: four sessions, very practical, on how we can develop our spirituality. That's a great thing to take on in Lent, finding a way to open ourselves up to the God who is at work in us. Remember, the goal which lies ahead of us isn't that we end our life chocolate free.

It's what Saint Paul says in 1 Corinthians. "Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face." That's the hope that lies before us. Our hope is that through the work of the spirit, our lives will be transformed from one degree of glory into another. And that one great day, we will see God in all his glory, face to face. If that's our goal, if that's our end point, let's be ensuring that this Lent, and