

Exodus 34, 29 - 35 (Moses and the veil)

Luke 9, 29 – 36 (Transfiguration)

“A change is as good as a rest.” – This English saying describes something that we can all relate to. Something different, a break in the routine, a change from our everyday lives has an invigorating effect on us. It could be a journey, a day out, a holiday, a party, time spent with family or friends. Whatever it may be, after such an experience we feel better and go back to school, or work or just the normal days refreshed and happy.

Far greater than just a change is an experience with God, a religious experience. Moses in the book of Exodus has had several encounters with God and each of them had a profound effect on him and on those around him. In Exodus 34 Moses had spent 40 days on the mountain, receiving a range of commands and instructions from God. Moses had climbed up to present the repentance of the Israelites: “Forgive our wickedness and our sin”, he said. God indeed forgave and made a new covenant, a treaty or contract with the people promising that He would do things in their presence that had never been done before.

When Moses returned from the mountain he brought more than just a new version of commands and instructions. He was changed, visibly different: “His face was radiant because he had spoken with the Lord.” Moses’ brother Aaron, the leaders of the community and later all the Israelites came and listened to what he had to say. In the text it says that they were in awe of him, hesitant to come close. They sensed that Moses had experienced something very special.

Scholars and academics like Alistair Hardy or William James have studied what is referred to as religious experiences. These events are not just described in the Bible but happen to ordinary people at all times. According to Hardy they are more frequent than we might expect. His research led him to conclude that around 60 % of the British people had what can be called a ‘religious experience’ where they realise that there is more to life than the ordinary, the normal. Both scholars also agree that these experiences are significant for the recipients, are life-changing and life enhancing. Often these encounters lead to faith, prayer or a renewal of religious belief. Although many never or hardly ever talk about their experiences the effects are noticeable and clear for others to see. What in Exodus 34 is described as “shining face” is a symbol for a deep inner change which gives real joy, satisfaction and reassurance to the experienter.

In the same way, Luke 9 describes a very significant experience that Peter, John and James have together with Jesus. They go on a mountain. It is not given a name, but stands as a symbol for a place of revelation. They make their journey probably in the late afternoon or early evening, in the last light of day when it is no longer hot. Thus, they arrive at the summit at night time and it is no surprise that Peter, John and James quickly fall asleep. We can see a parallel which foreshadows the events in the garden of Gethsemane during the night just before Jesus was arrested. Again, the disciples fall asleep while Jesus stays awake and prays. Equally, the night time links back to the birth of Jesus in the night of Christmas Eve. During the night the mysteries are revealed and God’s glory breaks through, illuminating the darkness.

Peter, John and James when they wake up see Jesus in conversation with Moses and Elijah – the greatest prophets in Judaism. They are described as being in “glorious splendour”, totally different from how people look in ordinary life. They talk about Jesus’ departure which is to take place in

Jerusalem. Then a cloud appears. The cloud is a symbol for God's presence in this scene and out of it they hear a voice: "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to Him."

The scholar William James after examining a thousand accounts of religious experiences concluded that they all have what he calls a 'noetic quality'. He means that the experiencer learns something, gains knowledge that could not have been acquired by other means. This characteristic is clearly present here, in Luke 9. The voice from the cloud confirms what has been made known before: Jesus is the chosen one, the Son of God. But there is more. The disciples are instructed to listen to him. This means paying attention to what Jesus tells them. In the passage immediately before this one, Jesus had talked about his death and explained the suffering that was ahead for him. There was a certain amount of incredulity amongst the disciples who found the idea of a suffering Messiah difficult to grasp. Here they are told specifically, to really pay attention. They are not simply to hear the words but to take them in, to ponder and consider them.

Behind this instruction lies the idea that Jesus' message is many ways counter-intuitive and goes against the prevailing, contemporary understanding of what the messiah was going to be like. The Kingdom of God is an "upside down" kingdom with the values of our world reversed. Another characteristic of a religious experience is its transiency. It comes and goes, it can't be commanded to appear (no matter how hard we try, we can't make an experience occur) nor can it be prolonged. Peter spontaneously voices this idea. He wants to make the occasion last, build shelters for them all to stay and spend time together on the mountain.

I think we can understand this. When something nice and pleasant occurs, we wish that moment would last, whether it is a pleasant, exciting holiday or time with friends and family. But we know that all good things come to an end, and any effort to prolong an occasion does not really work. However, what remains is the pleasant, cheerful feeling that goes with us into the next days, weeks or even years. After a great event, it is easy to return to work with a spring in one's step. How much more if the event was an experience with God.

So let us be open to an encounter with God – we don't know when but we can be sure that it will be more than just invigorating. There will be a change – after all we can't really meet God and then stay the same as before.