

heaven
a sermon preached on the
feast of the transfiguration
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ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
by the reverend colleen clayton

the lections: Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14; Psalm 97; 2 Peter 1: 16-19; Mark 9:2-10

Recently, I have been enjoying the work of Dr Paula Gooder, a distinguished, English New Testament scholar, theologian and laywoman. She is the Canon Chancellor of St Paul's Cathedral, London, and is a member of the Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission. Dr Gooder writes and speaks passionately about the New Testament, and she expresses her thoughts in a way that is accessible and exciting, explaining and giving new insights into the relevance and importance of the stories of our faith.

There is a YouTube video, which I highly recommend to you, on the subject of one of Dr Gooder's books, entitled *Heaven*. I found it fascinating to hear her speaking about the significant gap between what the Biblical tradition says about heaven and what the average Christian believes about heaven. (If you are intrigued, the details of where to find the YouTube video will accompany the text of this sermon on our website.)¹

Giving some consideration to heaven is important today as we celebrate the transfiguration, so I would like to share with you some of Dr Gooder's thoughts on the subject.

There is a tendency, she argues, for people today to think of heaven as a faraway place where I, and probably you, though almost certainly not them, will go, when I die. This is not however, she says, a Biblical view of heaven. In the Bible, heaven is the place where God dwells. In that ancient view of the created order, heaven is just above the dome of the sky. It is, in fact, the closest place that it is possible for God to be to humanity. The closest place that God can be to you and me.

Heaven, therefore, is not a faraway place for me to go to when I die. It is a very near place where God is right now. In our contemporary understanding of the universe, where we know that the sky isn't a dome and there isn't another world just the other side of it, we could perhaps think of heaven as a parallel universe. God dwells in a realm where justice, peace, hope, love, joy and compassion define reality. It is very close to us; it even breaks into our world from time to time.

This view of heaven affects who I am now and how I live in the world now. As Christians we pray that God's will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. In other words, where God is, justice, peace, hope, love, joy and compassion are done. Our prayer is that, by God working through us, these signs of the presence of God may also be found here on earth, today.

This image of heaven, and this prayer, is about humanity engaging with God who yearns to be close to the earth; who leans towards us, seeking us while we are still far off. God who is as near to us as it is possible for God to be, and who invites us to live in God's realm right now.

Let's think about the story of the transfiguration with that view of heaven in mind.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Cflxaggtfg>

The story of the transfiguration is one of the most important stories of the New Testament. It occurs in all three Synoptic Gospels, (Matthew, Mark and Luke), a version of it is recorded in the book of 2 Peter, and themes of transfiguration are spread throughout the Gospel of John.

Mark's account, which we heard today, is located exactly in the middle of his Gospel. This is not an accidental placement. The transfiguration is located centrally in the Gospel because its meaning is central to the Gospel.²

Prior to the transfiguration, Mark portrays the disciples as weak, full of human failings, unable to comprehend Jesus' message, confused by the events around them. Then they witness the transfiguration and afterwards, everything is Exactly the same! The disciples are still weak, full of human failings, unable to comprehend Jesus' message, confused by the events around them.

And that's the point. God's glory is revealed in the midst of human weakness. For each of us, living as a follower of Jesus is the story of being messily human despite having seen God's glory revealed.

I don't know about you but that is a relief to me! I can truly follow Jesus, know him as God incarnate, and learn to accept that I will still make a mess of things. The transfiguration reminds me that, though I remain human and flawed, I have witnessed through Jesus, the closeness of heaven to earth, God reaching out to meet me in the midst of my weakness, failure, confusion and fear.

The story of the transfiguration is rich with the symbolism of heaven meeting earth. The elements of the mountain, the light, the prophets, the cloud, and the voice of God, each add layers of meaning to what is being described.

- Jesus and his disciples are on top of a mountain. This is as close as it is possible for them to approach the God who is dwelling as close as possible to them.
- Jesus' appearance shines with light, not an earthly light but the light of heaven that comes simultaneously from God pouring God's glory onto Jesus, and from within Jesus, revealing his divine glory. Jesus, we see, belongs as much to heaven as to earth.
- Moses and Elijah, Israel's greatest prophets from the past appear, bringing about a meeting between the past and the present, the old tradition and the new thing that God is doing. It is significant that it is these two because, since Elijah went bodily into heaven at the end of his life, and Moses was said to have been buried by God, they were assumed to be available for God to send back to earth as messengers. Many Jews believed that it would be the arrival of Moses and Elijah that would signal the beginning of the end times and that God's reign was at hand.
- A cloud overshadows Jesus and the disciples on the mountain top. In the Bible, a cloud symbolises the presence of God. The Israelites are led out of slavery by a pillar of cloud; Moses stands before God who is in a cloud; at the moment of the dedication of the temple, it is filled with a cloud. "The cloud is glory. The glory is presence. It tells us that the Lord, the Father of all, is *there*."³
- And finally, to confirm everything else that the disciples are witnessing, God's voice speaks, identifying Jesus as God's beloved Son and telling them to listen to him.

The symbolism of the transfiguration tells us that this is a story of the meeting, communication, and crossing over, between the human everyday and God's mystery. Jesus is the point of intersection for all these things.⁴ It is in Jesus that the divine and the human meet, communicate, cross over, and the world is changed.

² Material drawn from Dorothy Lee's wonderful book, *Transfiguration*, Continuum: London. New York, 2004.

³ Dom Erik Varden, "Not rocket science", *The Ascension of the Lord*, The Tablet, 25 May 2019.

⁴ Dorothy Lee, *Transfiguration*.

But although the transfiguration reveals, through Jesus, the glory of God become flesh, that is not the whole story. Jesus' identity is dual, it is expressed in glory and in suffering, the transfiguration and the cross. God's voice that says to the disciples, *this is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!* (Mark 9:7) demands that, in the glory of the transfiguration, they don't forget Jesus' prediction of his own rejection, suffering, death and rising again. Nor can they forget Jesus' confronting promise that those who want to save their own life will lose it but those who lose their life for his sake and for the sake of the Gospel, will save it (Mark 8:31, 35).

Dorothy Lee says it like this;

“For Mark, the mount of transfiguration and the Mount of Olives belong together as equally revealing of Jesus' identity and God's self-giving glory. By the end of the Gospel we cannot see Jesus as the beloved Son except in relation to the way of the cross and the transfiguration.”⁵

In Mark's Gospel, what it means to be a disciple is bound up with the understanding of who Jesus is. The dual images of cross and glory provide the way through which we are called to follow Jesus. It is hard to hold together these apparent opposites, but we live in a world with a desperate need to see that God's way involves both.

God's power and glory is expressed in self-revelation, communication, acceptance. This is not the kind of power and glory that we can grab hold of. It must be seen and understood alongside the cross, and because of this we are enabled to trust that, no matter what suffering comes our way, God's power and glory is at work in our lives, transforming us. As we seek to be disciples of God's beloved Son, all our failings & misunderstandings are brought into the presence of God; into conversation with God, where through love we too are transfigured.⁶

Our own, individual journey of faith through which our brokenness is transformed by the love of God, is a story of good news. But, the Christian life is not simply about individual salvation, and so I would like to share with you one last thought from Dr Paula Gooder on the subject of heaven. It is the story of Jacob's ladder.

Genesis 28 tells us that as Jacob slept one night, he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it (Genesis 28:12).

At the end of the first chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus says to Nathanael, *very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man* (John 1:51). This image picks up the transfiguration experience of the disciples. Jesus himself, as he tells Nathanael, is the gate of heaven.

Today, this means that the gate of heaven is found amongst us. It is found in the waters of baptism, in the bread and the wine, and in you and me, the body of Christ on earth. The gate of heaven is to be found in the midst of us, and all the other flawed human beings who gather together as church, weak, failing, confused and afraid.

Through the transfiguration of Jesus, God has revealed to us the glory that already is and has given us a glimpse of the glory that is to come. In our midst is the gateway to the realm of God, the place where God's will of justice, peace, hope, love, joy and compassion is done. May we live to make it so on earth, as it is in heaven.

Amen.

⁵ Dorothy Lee, *Transfiguration*, 33.

⁶ Dorothy Lee, *Transfiguration*.