

unapproachable light

a sermon preached on the

last Sunday before lent

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at

st john's

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Exodus 24:12-18, Psalm 2, 2 Peter 1:16-21, Matthew 17:1-9

On this mountain set in the middle of the gospel – a mid point between the mountain on which Jesus sat down to teach and the mountain on which Jesus was crucified¹ – Peter, James and John are dazzled by an overwhelming light. Jesus the greater Moses,² his face shining like the sun.³

It's hardly surprising that light so captivates the human imagination; light, energy, and matter being the same single reality. We now know this *scientifically*. Peering into increasingly-sensitive telescopes, astronomers have relentlessly pursued the primal light of the cosmos. But in fact what we can now measure using scientific instruments, the spiritual traditions have known for millennia. Employing a variety of spiritual practices, spiritual seekers have relentlessly pursued the primal light of the Divine presence. One encounter – even one brief encounter – is pure intoxication, bliss, enlightenment, transfiguration, ecstasy.

Deep yearning for ecstasy – for ecstatic encounter with primal light – would seem to be fundamental to the makeup of our humanity. The illicit drug that goes by that name; the intoxicating bliss of sexual union; the mesmeric, sense-assaulting, flashing-lights experience of rock music; the literal or metaphorical ascent of dangerous heights; the euphoria of all manner of extreme physical activities; indeed, any number of possible ways by which ecstatic bliss is craved and sought – all indicate a deep human yearning for intimate, personal, and real encounter with the ultimate.

And it's hardly surprising that stories abound of near-death experiences involving long, dark tunnels and dazzling light encounters – but of course! The entire cosmos began in one cataclysmic flash of light/energy – and some say will end similarly. The apparently opposing realms of spirit and matter finally observed as the one ultimate reality. One-ness, completeness, the ecstasy of union. Our ordinary subjective experience of fragmentation, duality, dividedness transfigured by the dazzling light of the Infinite, the Ultimate, the Holy – the Divine *Mysterium Tremendum*.

Unlike Western Christianity, which has tended to use today's gospel as rationalistic 'proof' for the divinity of Christ – making much of the Divine voice's description of Jesus' Son-ship⁴ as an argument – in the Eastern Christian tradition the transfiguration is thought to reveal the mystery of what is called *theosis*, deification.⁵ Here the purpose of the encounter with Christ the dazzling light upon the mountain peak is for the *divinising of the human person*. The transfiguration is about Christ, yes – but is equally about us. St Athanasius of Alexandria declaring in the 4th century that: "He became man that we might be made god".⁶ We are all made to be "eyewitnesses of God's majesty".⁷ The morning star is rising in *our* hearts.⁸

But can we really know and experience that which is unknowable? Certainly, this dazzling light is non-material. Yet, though non-material, it is not merely symbolic, imaginary, or metaphorical – the light is reality itself. One is reminded of the cosmic background radiation which permeates the entire cosmos – of which we are a part. So though the light is not a physical light of the senses, it can be perceived by the senses – though only as an act of grace. What enables us to see Divine light is not our capacity – but the Divine act of grace within us. No one can truly experience the Divine light except those who are spiritually prepared to do so.

¹ Matthew 4:5, 27:33

² Exodus 34:29

³ Matthew 17:2

⁴ Matthew 17:5, 2 Peter 1:17

⁵ Greek: **θεωσις** *theōsis*, deification, ingodding

⁶ Kallistos Ware, 'Symeon the New Theologian', in Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainright, Edward Yarnold (eds), *The Study of Spirituality*, London: SPCK, 1992, p235.

⁷ 2 Peter 1:16

⁸ 2 Peter 1:19

This fact offers some insight as to why it is possible to take the drug called ecstasy, to experience the bliss of sex, to be transported momentarily by the mesmeric aspect of music and bright lights and extreme physical endeavours, and so on – yet, like Peter, James, and John, to completely fail to understand, and misuse, what has been experienced. Truly a case of having the experience but missing the meaning. This is increasingly the case in a culture where experiences are marketed as mass consumption products, and which lead not to true enlightenment, but only into higher rates of self-centeredness, possessiveness, drug-abuse and anti-depressant consumption.

Whereas all such pseudo lights are manufactured – products, programmes, strategies created for our self-directed gain – the Christ light is not created, but Divine. We notice in the gospel text that the light does not come from somewhere else – from outside Christ – but from within him. *He* is metamorphosed⁹ – just as transformation takes place not outside but inside the chrysalis.

Moreover, unlike the momentary experiences of dazzling ecstasy we do manage to manufacture for ourselves – whose fleeting nature is well known, and painful brevity the driver behind so much destructive addictive behaviour – the Christ light is infinite. Gregory Palamas, in the 14th century, described it as “like an ocean without limits”.¹⁰ We will never see the end of the Divine light – again, reminiscent of the cosmic background radiation. God is revealed, but never exhaustively. Perfection is to be seen not in static, but in dynamic terms – our pilgrimage is through all eternity.

Perhaps most crucially, the Divine light is both radiance *and* darkness. In the seminal phrase of the 6th century spiritual teacher known as Dionysius the Areopagite: “The divine darkness is the unapproachable light in which God is said to dwell”.¹¹ This spiritual fact diagnoses why Peter’s attempt to concretise his experience¹² is misguided, indeed dangerous. He, like us – and like all seekers of ecstatic experiences – wants only a one-sided experience of light, literally an out of body experience.¹³ The malaise at the root of this is dualism – the separation of body and soul, matter and spirit, and so on. But the story shows that this infantile and regressive claim is refused. They are ordered to remain silent because they will not understand the light – and will misuse it – until its opposite, the dazzling darkness of embodied crucifixion, is integrated into it.¹⁴ Dualism requires transfiguration.

The lectionary’s wisdom – in always giving us this story on the last Sunday before Lent – becomes clear at this point. In the insight of Dionysius: The God of Divine darkness “must be sought with an ‘eyeless mind’. The soul yearns for that ‘union with Him whom neither being nor understanding can contain,’ who is ‘Darkness which is beyond Light,’ and whose vision can only be attained through the loss of all sight and knowledge.”¹⁵

That insight accurately sums up the spiritual task of Lent – which we prepare for today in the draining and sealing of the font, the removal of the Paschal Candle, and in the burning of last Holy Week’s palm crosses.

And we can avoid the trivialising of Lent in superficial talk about giving up this and that, if we remember its essential purpose – the soul yearning ‘with an eyeless mind’ for encounter with the God of Divine Darkness who is beyond Light; longing to know and experience the same transfiguring light, entering bodily ourselves into the mystery of transfiguration – which this and every eucharist promises and enacts.

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⁹ Matthew 17:2 Gk: **μετεμορφωθη** *metemorphōthē*

¹⁰ Kalistos Ware, ‘The Hesychasts: Gregory of Sinai, Gregory Palamas, Nicholas Cabasilas’, in *The Study of Spirituality*, London: SPCK, 1992, p252.

¹¹ *ibid*, p253.

¹² Matthew 17:4

¹³ From the Greek **εκ-στασις**, *ek-stasis*, ‘out of place’

¹⁴ Matthew 17:9

¹⁵ Dionysius the Areopagite, in Ursula King, *The Christian Mystics: Their Lives and Legacies Throughout the Ages*, London: Routledge, 2004, p56.