

Wow!

Mark 9: 2-9 Transfiguration

I wonder what 'Wow!' moments you've had during your life, whatever age you are. One of my wow moments was on holiday in Florence several years ago. We'd had a long journey by train. We'd found our way to our hotel set on a really busy, noisy road, dumped our luggage and decided to set out to see the sights. Armed with a tourist map, we walked into the centre of Florence to see what we could find. The wow moment came when we turned right, from one busy street into another, and there in front of us was the magnificent cathedral dome dominating the skyline, the brilliant white stonework contrasting against the blue sky. It simply took my breath away and I just stood still as I took in the beauty and splendour of what I was seeing.

Another wow moment came just last week. We were out on our usual tea-time walk around the village and, as we turned right from Church Lane onto Long Drove, the most beautiful red sunset greeted us. Again, all you can do is stand still, speechless, as you take in its beauty. As an act of creation, it almost felt like a glimpse of the glory of God.

But probably the best example of a glimpse of glory, or in this case quite a sustained vision of glory, is the story of the transfiguration of Jesus which we read about in today's passage from Mark's gospel. The setting of this story is on a high mountain. Talk of mountains tells Mark's hearers straight away that something remarkable is about to happen. Remember those stories from the Old Testament where God first meets Moses on the mountaintop where he gives him the Ten Commandments, and then meets with Elijah at Horeb, called 'the mountain of God'. With those stories in mind, anyone reading or listening to Mark's gospel would have been on the edge of their seats waiting to hear with anticipation what happened next. And they're not disappointed.

Prior to this passage, Jesus has just turned the disciples' thinking upside down. In response to Jesus' question: '*Who do you say I am?*' Peter has declared that '*Jesus is the Christ.*' While they're getting their heads around this, he then begins to tell them how he will suffer and die but it's all too confusing. Suddenly, there's tragedy ahead, but the glory of Jesus' true being is also being revealed to them. He concludes his teaching by telling them that some standing there that day won't taste death before seeing the Kingdom of God come with power. And, just six days later, three of them *did* see it. We read

that Jesus took Peter, James and John and led them up a high mountain. We then read that Jesus' appearance changed from the inside out, right before their eyes.

One of the questions that always arises in my mind when I read this passage is the question of what Jesus' transfigured body looked like. The Greek word, translated '*transfigured*', is the word from which we get our English word metamorphosis. As a result, it implies that some change of form has taken place, a bit like Dr Who on TV regenerating into a new physical form. The question is, what kind of change was it for Jesus? Unfortunately, there's no direct answer to this since the gospels simply don't tell us. What they do tell us, however, is what happened to his clothes, information which is not quite as useless as it might first appear. Jesus' clothes, we are told, become a brilliant white.

Well, I don't really want to know what he was wearing, you might feel like saying. I want to know what he really looked like. But actually, a description of his clothes might have been the closest the disciples could get to describing what they saw. His brilliant white clothes suggest that what Peter, James and John saw was Jesus in all his glory – Jesus in his full divinity or, in other words, Jesus as he really was and is. Brilliant white garments, throughout the Bible, you will recall, are associated with God. This is why angels wear white, because they come directly from God, and the whiteness of their clothing reminds us of this.

And the disciples' response? Well, they're thoroughly confused. They don't understand what they're seeing, particularly when Moses and Elijah appear before them, talking with Jesus. Peter's response to this vision was gloriously human. My natural reaction whenever I get a glimpse of God – such as last week's sunset – is to say, '*Why can't it be like this all the time?*', and then to strive to return to that fleeting moment for more of the same. Peter, somewhat matter-of-factly, proposes building works. He must have regretted the words as soon as they left his mouth – yet what words could be adequate to this experience? What might you have said?

Peter's stumbling words are then eclipsed by the voice of God. Cloud comes down on the mountain. And again, clouds are important in Jewish tradition – they're frequently linked with the glory of God – and from the cloud God speaks the most treasured of words any of us can ever hope to hear:

'This is my Son, whom I love.'

On this Valentine's Day – love it or hate it – it's timely that our Bible passage for today contains such words of love.

Love that doesn't seek anything in return.

Love that doesn't have to be bought or earned.

Love that will not remove itself upon a whim.

The love of God is love at its purest, its truest: love that sees us for who we are, and loves us just the same.

But God says something else too. After *'This is my Son, whom I love'*, he says: *'Listen to him!'*

And we could do no better than listen today to what Jesus taught about love. The most famous verse in the Bible arguably is from John's gospel – John 3:16:

'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.'

A promise for each and every one of us. Our response to such love is found in Mark's gospel, chapter 12. When asked what the most important commandment was, Jesus replied with words that we know so well:

'The most important one is this... Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: Love your neighbour as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these.'

A command he repeats to his disciples in John 13:

'Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this, all will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.'

So, this Valentine's Day, let's commit to doing whatever we can to bathe our neighbourhoods and communities with God's abundant love. To reclaim that feeling of 'Wow!' as we recall how much we, like Jesus, are loved by our Heavenly Father, and to share that love with others.

Amen.