

Sabbath Glory

23.II.20 Last before Lent, All Saints Kings heath

Exodus 24:12-end

2 Peter 1:16-end

Matthew 17:1-9

A walk up a hill on your day off, away from the crowds, perhaps with a couple of mates? Sounds very familiar. But I don't usually see anyone shining or hear a voice from a cloud.

By telling us it's "Six days later" than some non-specific time, Matthew clearly wants to suggest the seventh day. Sabbath. Moses, too, waits six days up the cloudy mountain preparing for some kind of instruction from God, for the people. Clarity is a gift, unwanted sometimes, but a gift that comes on the Sabbath.

Reaching the top, heart pounding, breathy and sweaty, I feel the elation of senses heightened, the organic smells of earth, dung and grass mingle with the metallic smell of rainy air, and the tang of blood in the nostrils. Skin feels wet and I could pick out the feeling of a single one of the countless goose-bumps on my forearm or sweat droplets on my temples if I chose to. Wind buffets the ear drums, a flock of birds swoops, changing direction together suddenly like a shoal of fish. Eyes can pick out a blade of grass and yet see the distant blue shadows near the horizon. The tiny lyrical detail of my life and the epic scope of creation are held together in a dramatic, or even comic moment.¹

Indeed, the first thing the disciples experience as they recover their breath from the climb on their secluded mountaintop was a vividness, a brightness, a clarity of definition, something for which only a word like "glory" will do.

You couldn't read a book up on the hill. The pages would get soggy and stick together. I'd look daft in alb and stole there in the mud. (Some of you think I look daft wearing them here.) But the books do matter a lot. I promised to read them on other people's behalf when ordained: to "devote [my] best powers of mind and spirit" and "be diligent in prayer, in reading Holy Scripture, and in all studies that will deepen [my] faith and fit [me] to uphold the truth of the Gospel against error"². The effort to understand the big issues, describe, be truthful, to synthesise ideas, really matters. I know, though, when I get away I can admit sometimes I have found myself looking for an idea. Then I know that something has gone a bit wrong. I'm trying to be clever. Out of the spotlight, alone, I can admit sometimes that week I have dutifully ground through the Daily Office waiting for the next coffee, or worse, felt smug as I left church that all those other people passing by haven't thought to say Morning Prayer. Then, I know something relational and mysterious is slipping away. Again, these robes matter a lot. Putting them on before a service, believe it or not, protects you from my ego, but also they're the only thing that allows me to hold my head up and lead a funeral when all I want to do is sit in the pew and cry about my own father or mother. They matter. But if sometimes, I hardly dare admit, they might be an insulation against God. Then, I need a walk. For the Sabbath interrupts my religious speech and liturgies with a more impulsive, intuitive rhythm. There I can hear from a distance the tone of my own speech and notice the moments I have spoken with meanness or superiority, where my opinion has become prejudice, where I have mistaken resentment for righteousness, or anxiety for humility; where superiority darkens my speech. In Sabbath space, the relationship that all our theologising and ritual is meant to nurture can reassert itself.

Just so, on the hill top Peter is wonderfully bold to break in to the holy conversation between Elijah, Moses and

¹ See Wells using von Balthazar in [Crafting Prayers for Public Worship](#)

² ASB Ordinal p358

Jesus. It's as hilarious as all of us now breaking in to heaven's conversation with our clumsy praise. Peter talks about building shelters, like Sukkot. Mark Oakley puts it beautifully:

"All the important things in life need ritualizing and enacting – love needs a kiss, ideas need art, grief needs a funeral and faith needs a drama, not to cheapen it, but to celebrate and explore its richness, its unspeakable truths."³

So Peter suggest ritual, because he knows this moment matters but then, even as he is speaking, God interrupts *him*, insistent but not unkind, with words of love and relationship: "This is my beloved son... Listen to him." Religious discipline is important, religious desire to do something beautiful is lovely. Human impulse to create art is irrepressible. But at its heart must be relationship: with God and with neighbour. "Beloved." "Child." "Pleased." "Listen." Such charged and weighty words of relational power, heard in Sabbath space, then will be remembered in the hubbub of the crowded life these three disciples return to. Peter will remember much later when he writes to young Churches how that experience ensured for ever that his improbably intimate relationship with the creator mattered more than any sophisticated theologising. Again, theology really matters, but can slide into self-justifying "cleverly devised myths" if the unspeakable glory on the one hand and the intimate relational touch of God on the other are forgotten.

The grandeur of the landscape and smallness of my footprint already show my finitude. Then, giving in to the silence at the top, I feel the pleasant aches and remember the person I was privileged to pray beside in hospital who teaches me that one day these aches will not be pleasant. These knees will give way. I hear my heartbeat and know one day it will stop. The gravity of the funeral a fortnight ago, the unbearable beauty of the Baptism of a dying friend last weekend, is felt for a few moments. The tears that are held back on such occasions so that others can safely cry, find their way at last through the tiny duct to mingle with the sweat and evaporate into the Sabbath air. I relish the broken cloud, the shaft of sun igniting a "bright field,"⁴ the leaves laced with ten thousand spiders' webs and ridges of ploughed chocolate-rich soil, suggesting abundant crops to come. Yet I cannot see those without also catching the sweet smell of decay on the forest floor, the acrid whiff of a dead badger by the road. Feeling far from Church and Centre and Computer, I feel my dispensability. I'm accepted for a while, but I am not really needed by the world. One day my children will manage without me. I find I'm humming Leonard Cohen's song.⁵

May everyone live,
And may everyone die.
Hello, my love,
And, my love, Goodbye.

And here is the night,
The night has begun;
And here is your death
In the heart of your son.

And here is the dawn,
(Until death do us part);
And here is your death,
In your daughter's heart

3 Mark Oakley [By way of the Heart](#) p 35

4 See [A Bright Field](#) R.S.Thomas

5 Here it is on [Ten New Songs](#)

I do accept it, but there is a tearful vulnerability which can make you wonder how you can face another week.

When they hear the magisterial voice, the disciples lie face down, feigning death, a dramatic gesture, half fear, half reverence. The fact of the heavenly voice is in itself too big to comprehend. Such unmediated encounter with the divine crumples them into pathetic smallness. But also it is the affirmation Jesus receives that terrifies them. For he has just told them of the suffering he will endure at the hands of the authorities. This is the strange authority his heavenly Father affirms. This self-denying willingness to go towards pain is what appears to please the Father. No wonder the disciples are afraid. It is too big. Too intense. You can't bear it for long.

Returning home, in the sensual yet methodical process of preparing food it all seems to come together in a way I can hold. Again the detail, the fur on a sage leaf, the sulphurous crunch of cabbage, the glisten of meat, the dicing and searing, the treasuring and offering of a dish, the ridiculous amount of time put in to the appearance and taste of a mouthful that will disappear in moments, all accentuate the sense of our brevity and belonging in the world. However that touch is felt in your Sabbath, perhaps the dog's wet-nosed welcome home, the tender touch of a partner, or the no less tender touch of self-care, anointing in the bath, that touch does not deny the epic scale of what we have encountered in Sabbath mystery, but somehow honours the lyrical tenderness of our little life.

As the disciples lay face down, it was touch they needed. Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up. Do not be afraid." That simple gesture enables them to get up and make their way back to ministry among jostling crowds.

On their Sabbath walk, then, the disciples were given a vision of Moses who, in his Sabbath space, had been given a way of seeing that can shape a society with a life giving law.

They saw Elijah who represents a way of seeing that witheringly critiques a society or a religion gone sour, having forgotten the relationships it's meant to nourish.

They were with Jesus who shows a way of seeing that indeed critiques, but then enters the very suffering the soured society generates, but then overwhelms it with mercy and forgiveness.

The disciples see all three conversing. They feel their own mortality. They fall. They are touched and lifted up. They travel on with new vision that may not make immediate sense, but will ensure they see what they need to see when the time is right. "Don't tell anyone until it makes sense," Jesus suggests. You don't know what you will need to perceive, but this time prepares you to see it.

On my little sabbatical journey, I have solved nothing, decided nothing, but hopefully the sight is cleared ready to see what I don't yet know or understand I will need to see. Sharing such self indulgent reflection, in part I want to be accountable to you, but more importantly, I hope at least to hint that however Sabbath is shaped for you, none of us is so far after all from the disciples witnessing the transfiguration of Christ. Sabbath does not only recover from last week. It prepares us to recognise the "Majestic Glory" in the week to come. It helps us gaze upon and hold together all that is too big (a shooting, a stabbing, a flood, a war) with all that is tender and detailed (a gesture, a kindness, a smile). In Sabbath we witness intensely for a moment the shimmer hidden in the ordinary so we might on any day glimpse the king fisher flash of human glory; and accept, too, our mortality, silent and slow as the heron at dusk.