

Sermon on Sunday 2 March 2025

by Melanie Seward, Lay Reader

Readings: Exodus 34.29-end & Luke 9. 28-36



Do you love a good mystery?

I love a good murder mystery. We can try to spot the clues and, although we may not always understand them, we know the solution to the plot will be revealed - the mystery disappears.

God, I suggest, is not like this. There are lots of clues and questions about who God is and how he works in our lives and the world.

There is the Bible and the record of human experience of the divine, including our own experience of God. But we don't get the transparent sight of the divine (the unadulterated-by-

human-bias-and-limitation version) which gives an answer as to why it can be so hard to pray. Or, if God wants to know me why can he not speak a little more loudly and clearly?

For human beings, even the great Saints of the past, our awareness of God's presence and our confidence in it, is not constant - there are highs and lows, and our ability to tune into our spiritual wavelength fluctuates like the radio in a storm or the TV screen on a sunny day.

Even when we experience flashes of experience or insight into the mystery, we don't understand fully. In the Bible, we have examples of theophanies - times when God manifests or makes himself known in ways that are tangible to the human senses - in something we can feel, see or hear.

In the Old Testament, Moses is the greatest example of this. He meets with God at the top of a mountain and when he returns, his proximity to God has changed his appearance - his skin is said to glow or shine and this makes the people afraid.

Moses has to veil his face. Later, God's presence appears as a cloud over the tent in which the commandments are kept. All kinds of rules must be kept to both respect God's Glory and protect the people from contact with it. God's presence is literally terrific, all powerful, awesome, scary, even dangerous to those who break his laws - his is very 'other' and beyond.

There are echoes of this in the Transfiguration of Jesus. The appearance of the face of Jesus is changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. The disciples are unsure how to react. The cloud appears over them and they are afraid. The voice of God speaks.

How much of this idea of God is part of our background, our subconscious thought? These images of scariness, otherness, looming and distant and unknowable, all-powerful and all-seeing, can shape our reactions today, especially when we feel abandoned, hopeless or ashamed, without hope and overcome by the enormity of the worldly forces we can see and hear around us.

Our understanding of God can be distorted by ideas of the worst teacher who looks only at our faults, the distant parent who finds it difficult to show us love in a tangible way, the unchallengeable despot who rules yet by default allows injustice.

We get a glimpse of God's Glory in the Transfiguration of Jesus but spot the differences. In fact, it's all different because Jesus is different and he changes everything.

Moses and Elijah appear - both are expected at judgement time. Moses embodies the Law; Elijah stands for all the Prophets. Yet, God reveals that Jesus is his Son and it will be in him that everything will be fulfilled - all scripture, our lives and the life of

the world. We sense the glory of God, but also something of the divinity of Christ - God made man.

If we want to know who God is and how he works in our lives and the world, the best and most helpful picture we have is Jesus. God says, 'listen to him'.

In Jesus, we see a God who cares for all people; we see a God who heals and reaches out to the weak and the marginalised; we see a God who draws close through relationships and who offers a better way of living; we see forgiveness not revenge, love and not hate, life and not death. We see a God who yearns to hold us in his presence; God's Glory is about Splendour and Majesty, omnipotence and omnipresence, but he is not about threat, scariness and rules; God's glorious light brings love and hope and liberation.

I've only been to individual confession twice. To be honest, the second felt no different to the public confession we say together at the beginning of this service. The first was both surprising and life changing.

As a teacher on an ecumenical school trip with a Roman Catholic diocesan pilgrimage to Lourdes, I found myself at the last evening service. We were invited to say confession with one of the priests spread about the chapel. I wondered what it was like, saw lots of people getting up and felt pulled to do the same. Kneeling with trepidation, I waited.

How are you feeling?

I admitted I had no idea what to say.

'Just tell me how you are.'

'I don't know. I want to get close to God but there are things in the way. I've felt God since being very little but I still walk away. I just lose touch.'

By this time, I am shaking and tearing up.

'You sound to me as if you are frightened.' This was the key to unlock the heart.

The priest spoke about how there is nothing to be frightened of by an awesome God of love. How we all fall short and he is just wanting to pick us up and walk with us again.

He said, simply, 'So, what would you like to say to God?'