

The readings for this Sunday offer us two stories of God's glory.

In the Exodus reading, Moses was unaware of his own glowing face reflecting the radiance of his encounter with God – a radiance that remained with him between his meetings with God, and which the people were so uncomfortable with that Moses had to put on a veil, a covering to shield the people.

For the newly liberated people of Israel, accustomed as they were to the Egyptian ways, the God who had delivered them from slavery was still a great unknown.

The presence and glory of God, even as mediated presence and reflected glory, were disturbing and difficult to assimilate into ordinary life.

In the gospel reading, it is not just Jesus' face but his whole being which is radiant with light as he talks earnestly with Moses and Elijah, representatives of the Law and the Prophets.

It seems that as he was in prayer, a shift happened, a veil was lifted and Jesus shines with the fullness of his true nature.

He is described as being unbearably bright, and it's easy to imagine the three disciples, who are heavy with sleep having to shield their eyes from the sudden brilliance.

Both of these shielding responses to God's glory are interesting, given that according to ancient Jewish world view, God's glory is manifest in all of creation.

If you've been following the lectionary readings for the last few weeks, you'll remember that we recently heard of Isaiah's vision of God in the temple.

There the angels are singing 'holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.'
The whole earth is full of his glory.

And the psalmist says:

The heavens are telling the glory of God; God's glory fills all the earth.

Everywhere you look, everything in creation is showing us the glory of God.

Now the Hebrew word for glory implies weight or significance, so we could say that the whole earth is full of the weight and significance of who God is.

Everything made by God is part of the telling of God's glory.

These two stories also suggest that as well as weight, glory has an element of light, of luminosity and radiance – a brightness that is almost unbearable.

I know when I stop and think about it, there are special places – like the Tawharanui peninsula, the Remarkables, the bay of islands - where the beauty of the landscape just takes my breath away.

Places where I find it easy to see a glimpse, a flash of a joyful vastness I cannot adequately put words to.

Perhaps you have places that speak to you in this way – or you remember moments of transcendent connection, of joy so complete you are speechless.

I heard a professor from Pittsburgh seminary tell a story once of an experience like this.

He was just sitting at his desk looking out the window when suddenly, unexpectedly everything shifted.

Everything took on an aspect of brilliance, as if an extra dimension were present; colours were somehow more true, there was a depth, a crystalline shimmer in all he saw.

He was reluctant, almost apologetic as he described it and mentioned that he'd also gone for a brain scan afterwards because he couldn't quite believe what had happened was real –

even though he **knew** that what he had experienced was God's glory -

the kingdom of heaven in his midst.

I have never had an experience quite like that, but there have been some particular occasions of that kind of glorious connection that really stand out in my memory and have brought me comfort and hope when I've felt disheartened.

It's no surprise that we often refer to these as mountaintop experiences, because like this reading today, they seem fleeting and out of the ordinary.

But as the transfiguration story seems to tell us, inspiring as they are, most of us don't live on the mountain top.

We must let the glorious experience become a treasured memory to inspire us in moments of doubt or despair, and we must gird our loins for what awaits us in the valley of Sunday afternoon squabbles;

Monday at the office;
laundry to fold;
family to attend to;
sickness to nurse;
deadlines to meet;
difficult conversations to navigate....

After all, this is what Jesus and his companions returned to and this is where we also must journey - with faith.

And this is a truth that I have rather reluctantly accepted for most of the time I've been following Jesus.

But I wonder if there is another way for us to hear this story of mountain top glory and how it relates to the valley where there are broken hearted parents and suffering children;
Where there are frustrated disciples and curious onlookers.

To the valley where we live most of our lives.

Because I wonder if the story of the transfiguration is not showing us a temporary, partial and special glimpse of God's glory, but rather it's showing us what is always there.

Jesus is the fullness of God in human form.

From his conception onwards, Jesus is never less than the fullness of God in human form.

He is One with God, the Eternal Son embodied – skin and bone, toenails and tonsils.

It cannot be, then, that Jesus while praying had a glorious mountain top moment of transcendent connection, which the three disciples were lucky enough to witness.

Because Jesus is the fullness of God in human form and because the whole earth is full of God's glory.

God is never not present in glory. God is never distant and then comes close.

God is never not present in Christ Jesus.

So what changes on the mountain top?

It can only be what we see. It can only be what we perceive and our awareness of God's presence.

Today, you may be basking in the light and comfort of God's presence, while one pew over another sits in the

valley of despair, grieving for a loss, sensing only God's absence.

The transfiguration story sets these two realities side by side and even though the lectionary allowed me to choose if I would include the healing story, how can we separate the glory of God's presence from the pain of the broken world?

We need an understanding of faith that is gracious and courageous enough to hold both of these realities together because they are both true at the same time.

We in New Zealand live on a mountaintop.

We are part of the privileged section of our global village and yet we have brothers and sisters in other parts of the world – not far away - who live in the valley of hunger, of violence and warfare and abuse.

At the same time our digitally advanced culture can plunge us into valleys of isolation, anxiety, exhaustion, superficiality....

While others without our advantages are gloriously nourished by cultural traditions and communal ways that are lost to us.

The mountaintop and the valley are here, now, among us, and we need a way to speak of agony and of glory so that neither is lost or discounted, denied or rejected.

The suffering of the father and son waiting in the valley is real and tense and we need to make sure we don't flatten it out by grasping at the glory of the healing and the happy ending.

Glory is light and weight. Glory is joy and sacred significance.

Glory is the fullness of God present in the fullness of life. One of the early church fathers, saint Irenaeus said:

The glory of God is a human being fully alive.
Just think about that for a moment.
The glory of God is a human being fully alive.

Alive to the presence of God in all of life, alive to the fullness of life itself with the agony and the glory.

Are you alive to the fullness of God's presence, are you alive to see and perceive the glory of God hidden in plain sight - the whole earth drenched in God's presence.

And God present with us and within us.

This has been a huge stumbling block for many Christians – that even now God is radiantly dwelling within you.

But remember, everything made by God is part of the telling of God's glory.

You, basking or broken, are the dwelling place of God's glory – of light and sacred significance.

Nearly five hundred years ago in Spain, there was a nun, an abbess, who was also trying to convince her novice sisters that they were indeed the dwelling place of God. She told them:

“There is a secret place. A radiant sanctuary. As real as your own kitchen. More real than that. Constructed of the purest elements. Overflowing with the ten thousand beautiful things.... This magnificent refuge is inside you.”

She paints a beautiful picture of this inner sanctuary within each of us.

And then she says:

“Enter.

Shatter the darkness that shrouds the doorway...”

Enter the inner sanctuary as you pray, and quietly, humbly, gracefully learn to be at home within it.

She ends with this:

“Believe the incredible truth that the Beloved has chosen for his dwelling place the core of your own being

because that is the single most beautiful place in all of creation.”

The everyday is glorious.

The mountaintop is within you.

The agony is also present.

I believe when we learn to hold these two together in love, as Jesus did, we will find like the first disciples that we - fully alive - are the way God brings healing and peace to our broken world.