

Why church windows don't have curtains

A sermon on Luke 9.28-36 preached at St Peter's Wolvercote on Sunday 18th February 2007 (the Sunday before Lent) by Emma Davies, ordinand at Ripon College, Cuddesdon, on placement at St Peter's Church.

Luke 9.28-36

²⁸Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. ²⁹And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³⁰Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. ³¹They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. ³²Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. ³³Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, 'Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' Peter did not know what he said. ³⁴While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. ³⁵Then from the cloud came a voice that said, 'This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!' ³⁶When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And the disciples kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

Have you ever noticed that traditional churches like this one don't have curtains? I wonder why this is? Is it because it would be too difficult to put them up? Or because the windows are an odd shape? Or because it would be too expensive? Or there would be too many differing opinions about the fabric and the colour and the design?! Or because we are rarely here when it is dark? Perhaps it is because it would detract from the beauty of the windows. I was here at the wonderful Candlemas Choral Evensong a couple of weeks ago. After the service I stood outside in the dark and was captivated by the splendour of the Piper window. The church was fully lit up inside and the light streamed through the window into the darkness in a breath-taking way. Closed curtains would have destroyed this amazing sight.

This morning's gospel reading speaks of light radiating out from Jesus, transfigured as he prays on the mountaintop. It is a scene of glory, the presence of Moses and Elijah endorsing the fact that here is a glimpse of life and light from a different place – the substance of heaven. It is a scene of light and hope. However, it is in some senses also a scene of darkness. Some commentators have assumed that this episode happened at night. Even if it did not, the cloud comes and overshadows them, darkening the scene, and it is at this point that the disciples become "terrified". The setting of the passage within the Gospel is also significant, hinting at the darkness to

come in the story. It follows immediately on from Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah which prompts Jesus to explain that he will be rejected, suffer and die before being raised again to life. Within this morning's passage we are told that the conversation topic of Jesus, Moses and Elijah is "his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem". And not long after this episode Jesus again tells his disciples about what is to happen to him, as he begins his long journey to Jerusalem. We know already what will happen at Jerusalem, we have heard of the cross, the suffering and the death. So, the narrative even here at the point of Jesus being transfigured by eternal glory hints at the horror which is to come before the resurrection.

The disciples, despite being told, consistently misunderstand. Peter latches on to the glory of Jesus and tries to hold on to it by suggesting dwellings are built for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. I am sure it is no coincidence that it is these same three disciples, Peter, James and John, who are in the garden of Gethsemane, some weeks later. There they are still not quite with the plot, as they prove unable to watch even one hour as Jesus faces the final darkness. And I am sure it is no coincidence that the church has chosen this reading on the last Sunday before we enter the season of Lent. From Wednesday, we begin too to follow Jesus to Jerusalem, each step taking us closer towards the darkness of Good Friday. It is only when we have witnessed to the event of the crucifixion that we shall be able to experience the hope and the glory of Easter Sunday.

What has this to say to us today? We all face dark things in our lives. Sometimes they are too painful to deal with. Sometimes it is easier to cover them up, not to look at them, to hide them away within ourselves. It is like drawing a veil over them. Like drawing curtains over a window. But the reading from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians this morning takes the theme of transfiguration and personalises it for us. Paul assures us that if we turn to Christ any barrier between us and him will be removed. Better than that, if we turn to Christ with "unveiled faces" we shall allow him to transform us "from one degree of glory to another". His light will shine within us, will illuminate and will gradually transform us into his likeness. Like light shining through a beautiful stained-glass window.

So the message of transfiguration is tinged with darkness and fear but is ultimately about transformation and hope. It invites us to be a bit smarter than the disciples – to recognise Jesus for who he is – the Son of God. To recognise that his path to glory necessarily involved, out of love for us, willing suffering and death. To recognise that because of that he will, if we let him, shine glorious within us now, transforming all our lurking shadows into light.

As we approach Lent, perhaps this challenging but encouraging message is what we need. No agonising over what to give up or what to take on! How wonderful instead to be lit up from within and transformed by the presence of Christ within us. That's the encouraging bit. The challenge is that we need to turn to him with unveiled faces. No curtains. It is tempting perhaps to hide behind something, to try to sort out our inner selves before we open up and face God. Isn't that how we've faced Lent before? Conscious of sin but hiding away? But drawing the curtains doesn't let the light *in* any more than it lets it *out*. We may be apprehensive about facing the brightness of God's glorious light. We may be unsure what it will show up within us. We need to remember that we are each lovingly hand-crafted by God like a wonderful stained-glass window. He acts only out of love for us. And if we have the courage to face Christ openly this Lent and to invite him to shine within us, we shall not only experience his transforming love afresh. We shall also become signs of hope for others in this sometimes dark and terrifying world as Christ's light shines out, bright, warm and compelling through all the rainbow colours of our personalities – with no curtains to hinder it. Amen.