Mark 9v2ff Glory and doubt

When we come to church on a Sunday, this could be the only time in the week when we hear anyone talking about God. It might also be the only time when we read the bible or pray. This is scarcely surprising when we think about our society. As Alastair Campbell, the former British Prime minister, Tony Blair's director of strategy and communications. "We don't do God.” Neither do most people in our western societies. God does not enter into the way that they shape their thinking or behaviour. Many people still have a residual belief and would be shocked to think that they were in practice non Christians. They have what is called a secular view of the world. They don’t do God, but they don`t find religion to be necessary for their lives. Now how do we reach out to these people and convince them that Jesus said that a relationship with him, brings life and life in abundance. Even more challenging**, how do we convince people who find the whole idea of a God who interferes in the world not at all convincing or even down right stupid?**

Well let’s start somewhere quite unusual with the bible readings from today and first with the Gospel reading from Mark chapter 9.

The story speaks of Jesus taking the inner group of his disciples, Peter , James and John up a mountain and there his glory is revealed.

Now what on earth is glory. Well my rather old Theological word book of the bible puts it very simply. It means the presence of God on earth. Then later it says the throughout the NT Christ is presented as the glory of God made visible on earth to those whose eyes are opened to see it, but it is in John’s gospel that it is most clearly expressed. We have seen his glory as of the only begotten of the father.

Now how did the disciples come to realise that Jesus was the human face of God ? Did they see that he was by the quality of his teaching? No, they would have settled for the title rabbi. In fact, they did often call him rabbi? Well, what about his miracles? Well, people in those days were much more open than we are to accept that miracles do happen and so some people did think he was a prophet like Elijah.

But how can you convince three first century Jewish man, that Jesus is first the Messiah and even more difficult the son of God. The first task was possible, almost the whole nation was eager for the Messiah to come, someone who would liberate them from foreign rule, but the idea of God becoming a human was totally alien to the Jews. At which point readers of Der Spiegel, a German magazine that always finds strange explanations for what really happened to Jesus- they would say well the Greeks thought the Gods came to earth. Well they would, wouldn`t they. Their gods resemble a Fasching party, but the God of the Jews was totally other. So idols, no statues, no stories of him visiting women, or even having anyone or anything like him around. So how do you get three Jewish men to accept that God is here on earth in the person of Jesus. Not easy.

They needed it spelling out to them in unmistakeable terms.

They needed a transformation in the appearance of Jesus, a cloud, it required no less than Moses and Elijah to turn up and if they couldn`t trust what they saw they need to hear a voice from heaven.

Now I find it quite amusing that God has such a hard task teaching his disciples – as a teacher it gives me hope. You see the disciples are incredibly slow to catch on to what is going on. They are almost comical in their reaction.

Now to understand these men we have to remember that they had a privilege that has not been given to us. They were Jews. They had grown up hearing the stories of how God appeared to Moses on a mountain, they knew how the appearance of Moses had been transformed by this encounter. They knew that Moses and Elijah would appear at the end of time to announce the coming of the messiah.

So when Peter sees Jesus transformed and talking to the two of them. He blurts out, It’s right grand to be hear with you, shall I built a tent here, in fact I could run to three tents.

What is he blathering on about.?

Peter is no dumbo, he knows that Moses used to meet with God in his tent and then the people would come and speak to him outside his tent. This meant that the people of Israel would once again have a leader in contact with God- a leader who would bring them out of the slavery of Roman domination and give them all that they hoped for.

Let the good times roll….

But as ever, Peter has not realised what has happening. Not for the first time, not for the last time- he is quick to realise what is going on- he sees , but then comes to the wrong conclusion. And he does this consistently because Peter always wants to go the easy way to glory. Only the week before Jesus had told the disciples as clearly as possible- he was going to suffer before he entered into glory. Peter could not accept it then, he could not accept it now, he could not accept it in Jerusalem. But to be fair to Peter he did in end learn it.

Then a cloud appeared and a voice comes from heaven. What do our intrepid band of brothers do ? They have a quick look round to see where the voice is coming from ? They just don’t get it. They are overwhelmed and it takes them hours, days of arguments amongst themselves and many questions put to Jesus before they can begin to make sense of this reality.

A former Archbishop of York, Stuart Blanch says of this passage, Nowhere in the gospel is the influence of the Old Testament more apparent than in this passage. All these words and phrases, six days, the high mountain, the tents, the cloud, the voice everywhere recall the giving of the law some fourteen centuries earlier. In other words, God used symbols and actions which should have been immediately obvious to someone brought up as a Jew. Peter , James and John realised the meaning of these symbols. They recognised that Jesus had an incredible relationship to God, they realised that he was the Messiah, but they could not break out of their past and accept that God was about to do things differently to the way they expected. Most significantly, they could not accept that Jesus would suffer and die. We must not condemn Peter for this, rather we should spare a little sympathy for them. And let`s now turn from criticising the disciples and look in the mirror. Do we really understand who Jesus was and is and what that means for our lives? That sounds like a typical question from a preacher- a complicated question with a so called simple answer in a two minute sound bite. No, I don`t do sound bites and I hopefully respect your life experience and your struggles to find and maintain faith.

If you struggle to find God in your daily life and find these stories difficult to believe, take heart from these three men. They had Jesus in person as their teacher, who have you got this morning, a retired teacher from Stockport. They saw Elijah and Moses, well this congregation can`t quite compare can it? Well have I got news for you. You know that second reading we had. It says, that the members of this congregation are even better than Moses. How come? When Moses received the ten commandments as he came down in the presence of God- his face glowed. In the transfiguration story, the face of Jesus glows and so do his clothes. A sign of the glory of God- a sign of the transforming presence of God. When Paul was on the road to Damascus to kill the Christians, he sees the glory of Christ and hears a voice. It is the beginning of his transformation from deadly enemy to a disciple. After being baptised and welcomed into the Christian church in Damsacus, he goes to Arabia for7 years. We have no idea what he did or exactly where he was in this time. But I expect he needed that time to work out what it means to be a disciple of Christ. What is clear from his second letter to Corinth chapter 3 is that Paul believes that God gives to every Christian the glory of God. Which means God not only comes near to us, but through his Holy Spirit comes to be within us. The meaning of this is that we have God`s help to enable us to be transformed and thereby to change the world. Paul makes it abundantly clear in chapter 4 that our task as Christians is to follow Christ and as we seek to do his will in our lives, we will be like light to the world. The second reading makes it abundantly clear that some people in our society will not be able to accept our message. Their way of life and thinking leads them to dismiss the whole idea of religion and to pour scorn on our beliefs. But there will be others who will come to faith. Few of them will do so by attending philosophical lectures, or listening to sermons, but when non Christians have the chance to meet people like you, they can find hope. You can mend broken people, you can listen, you can care, you can send e-mails, get on the phone, invite them round, go for a coffee, you can be like Christ, for Christ is in you and by simple everyday service, by doing your daily work for God and not your boss, people who are now in darkness can see the light- the glory of God, his presence here on earth. God may have called some of us to do incredible things, but for most of us it is something that we are already aware of, perhaps something we are hesitant to do, because we don`t feel capable. But if god asks you to do something, he will not only be there alongside you, he will work within you. You know what Jesus would say if he were standing next to me, Mark 10:27 Looking at them, Jesus said, “With people it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God.”. So, don`t worry, if people don`t do god, we do and we have a job to do -to transform the world.