

LAST SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY – 2nd March 2014 7.00am Eucharist 8.00am Eucharist 9.30am Solemn Eucharist Readings: Exodus 24:12-18; Psalm 2; 2 Peter 1:16-21; Matthew 17:1-9

This year's Winter Olympics in Sochi have directed the spotlight on Russia's record on human rights and corruption. When a country hosts an event like the Olympics it reflects on that country's reputation in the world community. Ideally the standing of that country will be enhanced as a result.

Then there are the individual athletes. I always feel a bit sorry for those who train hard and have the potential to win but for whatever reasons don't quite make the grade in the deciding event. They're not always treated fairly, especially by the media. We seem to have a need to create celebrities, famous people. Then we're disappointed when they pass their prime or when they display signs of not being up to the status we've helped create for them.

I was saddened as I'm sure you were, of the news of Ian Thorpe's depression. Questions were raised about this very issue: what happens to champion athletes when their celebrity status wanes, when the glory fades? What do you do for an encore?

What feeds our hunger for glory and fame? Like me, you may have no desire to be an Olympic gold medalist, but we all need to feel important, to matter, to be valued. What feeds the dissatisfaction in our lives?

Our readings today help us with these questions. They speak of another kind of glory. They also relate some encounters with God. We come here to meet God, to pray to God, to learn about God and hopefully to know God. In the Bible, mountains were favourite places for encounters with God. Each of us came to know about God somehow.

Usually our understanding of God develops and changes. We see in the Hebrew Bible an evolution from a polytheistic to a monotheistic understanding of God. The monotheistic view of God itself moves from a tribal warrior God who was in competition with other gods and who demonstrated his glory by defeating his enemies to one who was not in competition with anybody and who was not like the other gods, simply I AM.

One of the features of a maturing faith, especially when one reaches middle age, is being comfortable with mystery and ambiguity and uncertainty. That's what the word "glory" means in the Exodus reading when Moses encountered God on the mountain: "The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai" (24:16). It's how the Bible speaks of the mysterious, inscrutable and inaccessible power and presence of God. Furthermore, we're told this glory is like (not "is" but is "like"!)" a devouring fire." It is something to be respected and not trifled with. Finally, this glory is hidden in a cloud. If Moses is to meet God he has to enter this dark cloud, and that's risky.

Passages like this are narrating something that is actually beyond description. In the words of OT Professor Walter Brueggemann: "encounter with the divine presence . . . resists all of our

explanatory categories.” We can attempt to capture it in words but ultimately words fail us and we are left simply to wonder and adore – to worship.

God’s glory can never be captured. Later, in chapter 33 Moses tells God, “Show me your glory” (v. 18). God says, “I can’t do that. It’ll kill you.” Finally God allows Moses to see only his back as he walks by. Later still, in chapter 40, God’s glory finally comes to rest in the tabernacle. Yet even there it is hidden again by a cloud. Nothing happens. God is simply “there” in his unutterable otherness.

Brueggemann says, “Very much ‘religion’ among us imagines that people contact God immediately, whether in direct mystical experience or in chatty prayer. . . . This is a warning against religious *intimacy* and the notion that God can be a ‘best friend’ or a ‘good buddy’ who is endlessly attentive to us.”

He says it also puts our ideological hobby horses for which we claim God’s support, in their place. “This includes our churchly passions concerning liturgy, doctrine, piety, and morality. It also pertains to all of our sociological, political ideologies that we too readily invest with absolutism. The glory of God, hidden in majesty, de-absolutizes all of our best investments, liberal and conservative. The God who meets Moses is like a devouring fire hidden in a cloud, a holy presence who will fit in none of our boxes or ally easily or permanently with any of our crusades” (Huff Post Religion, February 25, 2014).

Today’s Gospel describing the experience of the disciples when Jesus was transfigured shows us the glory of God is now seen in the face of Jesus. The reading from the 2nd letter of Peter, which almost certainly was not written by Peter, looks back on this experience. Like the encounters of Moses, the disciples witnessed the “Majestic Glory” (1:17).

Like the “devouring fire” this glory scared them out of their wits: “they fell to the ground, overcome by fear” (Matthew 17:6). Worship can be, in fact probably ought to be at times, a dislocating and disruptive experience. If it never moves us we’re missing out. As with Moses on Mount Sinai and again at the tabernacle, they were overshadowed by a cloud. Peter’s offer to build three shelters, tents, dwellings, tabernacles, possibly was an attempt to contain the experience, to domesticate the divine. But it couldn’t be done.

Also, he felt the need to *do* something. In our activist age we feel we have to *do* something. Peter wanted to build shelters. The awe-inspiring vision before him invited one response: that of speechless worship and adoration. Peter felt the need to talk. Mark’s account says he did not know what to say.

Like most activities in our culture, worship is often seen as instrumental, as producing some tangible result: increasing the numbers in church, getting people to give more, or simply to feel more peaceful or to recharge the batteries to face another week.

Rodney Clapp, an author and theologian who focuses on Christianity and culture, says “the praise of God is what worship is about. Like the ethos of Sabbath at its roots, worship is not primarily about productive work. Worship is distorted and even perverted if it is made

instrumental, the means to some other end than glorifying and honoring God. . . . But if people undertake worship in order to become happy and healthy, they are using God as a means to their own ends. . . . True and right worship (literally orthodoxy) is first and foremost the service of God and needs no further justification” (Rodney Clapp, “On the Making of Kings and Christians,” *The Conviction of Things Not Seen: Worship and Ministry in the 21st Century*, ed. Todd E. Johnson).

It’s like someone falling in love: no justification is needed. “What good does that do?” “What practical value does that have?” Even our relationships can become utilitarian. “What can this person do for me?” “What value is this person?” Romantic love is about spontaneity, surprise and adventure. What good are a dozen roses or some nice cologne or a pleasant dinner? Such questions don’t make sense to the one in love. The very expression “*falling* in love” says it all.

Charles Wesley’s hymn, “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling” contains the line, “lost in wonder love and praise.” If there is any goal in worship, it’s surely to be lost – to get lost, if you like – in a time and place beyond all times and places where we allow God’s love to so fill us that we’re lost in wonder, love and praise.

We come here not seeking only information but adoration. We come not only to think about God but to know and love God. As we enter Lent this week, may that be the experience of all of us: to be lost in wonder, love and praise.

Fr Mark Watson

Canon Pastor, Christ Church Cathedral, Newcastle