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Bright Cloud (Matthew 17: 1-9)

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‘And Jesus was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white ... [S]uddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, “This is my Son, the Beloved ... listen to him”’.

Today we celebrate the event we call ‘the Transfiguration’. Historically, at least in the chronology of the gospels, this happening is remembered as one of the pivot points in Jesus’ ministry. It occurs just after Peter has recognized Jesus as ‘the Messiah, the Son of the living God’ (Matt 16: 16), and Jesus has told his disciples for the first time that his mission will take him to his death. At the event of Transfiguration, it’s as if both recognitions, both truths are confirmed. The voice from the cloud confirms what Peter has understood about Jesus: ‘this is my Son, the Beloved’. And it confirms Jesus on his way: ‘with him I am well pleased, listen to him’. From henceforth, Jesus’ teaching about the necessity of his death will intensify – which is why, in the church’s year, we celebrate this event of Transfiguration just before we move into the season of Lent, the season of preparation for Easter.

There are some familiar and important theological themes to be drawn out of this narrative. One is to do with the understanding that Jesus embodies and fulfills all that God has taught Israel about how to live justly and with mercy; hence the presence at the scene of Moses and Elijah, representing the law and the prophets. Another theme is to do with the mysterious testimony that, in Jesus, the light of God enters fully into the darkness of the world, so as to enlighten and liberate us from within.

But tonight I want to focus on another dimension of this story. I want to explore its depiction of what it’s like for us to encounter God, in some sense, directly. I’m

interested in that 'bright cloud' that overshadows Jesus and his disciples, and the voice that issues from it. And I'm wondering what this metaphor and this manner of experiencing God might have to teach us about trusting our own journeys and hearing our own call.

Of course, trying to speak of what it's like to encounter God directly, or what it feels like to 'experience' God is always fraught with danger. This is because once we start to associate certain phenomena or certain subjective effects with the presence of God, then the temptation is to become fixated on these. We start looking for visions of light or fire or cloud, or focusing on certain kinds of feeling – like peace, say, or elation – as proof that God is here. We focus on *our* experience as 'an end in itself, something that has its own significance'.¹ And this is a dead end in the spiritual life, because what really matters is not that we have any particular experiences, but that we are changed – that our lives come to conform more and more to the merciful, compassionate pattern of God's life.

And yet, having said this, there is a rich literature in our tradition – of which this Transfiguration story is a part – in which encounter with God *is* described in experiential metaphors: 'a bright cloud overshadowed them'. And if these metaphors and images aren't simply arbitrary, if they are truthful attempts to convey something of the divine-human encounter, then this suggests they might be resources for us – they might help us reflect on, make sense of our encounters with God.

For the early Christian community, the cloud in this Transfiguration story would have evoked the remembrance of other clouds in Scripture – notably the cloud that enveloped Mount Sinai as Moses went up to receive the tablets of the covenant (Ex. 24:15), and the pillar of cloud that descended on the tent of meeting, whenever the Lord came to speak with Moses (Ex. 33:9). In the Scriptural imagination, it's as if we're to expect clouds to descend when God shows up. But what's that about? What is it

¹ Dom David Foster, *Contemplative Prayer: a new framework* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p.11.

about the presence of God that apparently provokes the experience of being ... in a fog, unable to see far ahead, the horizon hidden from view?

Well, the metaphor of the cloud expresses (I think) at least two aspects of what it's like to experience God's nearer presence. On the one hand, everything that once seemed clear to us, everything we thought we knew about ourselves and about God starts to become less clear, more mysterious. The image of the cloud suggests that the closer God comes to us – at least initially – the more we feel as though we don't know nuthin' and we can't see clearly. Maybe the cloud descends in the form of shifts in our experience of faith – we don't feel as sure of things or we find it hard to pray. Maybe it descends in the form of painful life circumstances, as our sense of identity is challenged by failure, loss of work or relationship or illness. These kinds of experience can make us deeply anxious that we are losing sight of God and ourselves rather than being drawn closer. But the cloud descends anyway, and there comes a point where we understand that the only way we'll grow towards truth and real knowing is by entering into this cloud. A necessary dimension of the spiritual journey involves the felt experience of being stripped of our certainties and of losing our way.

Parker Palmer speaks of the contemplative journey in these terms, as a way of disillusionment and disorientation. And in a similar vein, the 14th century treatise on contemplative prayer called (significantly) *The Cloud of Unknowing*, speaks of the need to place all our clear thoughts, ideas, and memories beneath the 'cloud of forgetting' and then to turn our whole attention to the 'cloud of unknowing' that 'lies above you, between you and your God'.² Here, we're told, 'it is usual to feel nothing but a kind of darkness about your mind'.³ And although it doesn't feel like it, this *is* growth, progress in the spiritual life. This entry into the cloud is described by the tradition – paradoxically, ironically – as the way of 'illumination'. In the words of Rowan Williams, it involves 'the

² *The Cloud of Unknowing & The Book of Privy Counselling*, ed. William Johnston (New York: Image Books, 1973, 1996), p.45.

³ *The Cloud of Unknowing*, p.40.

sense of being drawn into a central magnetic area of obscurity ..., the running-out of language and thought', where this sense of obscurity is the effect on us of 'the compulsion exercised by a reality drastically and totally beyond the reach of our conceptual apparatus'.⁴

But how do we know this is the cloud of unknowing, the cloud from which God might speak? What makes this sense of darkness, this experience of being in a fog different from mere muddle, or the refusal of God? Well, I think it's to do with the sense (despite everything) that there is something behind the cloud, just hidden from view. The very fact that our state is experienced as being *in* a cloud signifies our awareness that there is a 'sun' beyond. As we enter the cloud, our yearning for clearer sight and connection intensifies. We have an intuition of the possibility of meeting God 'face to face', and we long to pierce the veil.

And every now and then, the sun breaks through. The cloud brightens, we see things in a clearer light. This is never something we can force or make happen. *The Cloud of Unknowing* insists that all we can do is learn to be at home in the cloud, fixing our attention and love on what one writer has described as this 'something that seems empty, ...this blank that, nevertheless, seems to be the essential and ultimate thing'.⁵ When the light breaks through it's rarely, I think, a clear vision of the whole – as if we suddenly see 360 degrees from the mountain-top. It's more like there's enough light for the next step. Perhaps something clarifies – there's an insight, a new knowing – the kind of knowing and clarity of purpose that impelled Jesus down the mountain and drew him faithfully on.

'[S]uddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice came'. Not all of us could describe our encounter, our experience of God in this image – as an actual happening. But as we persist in prayer and the spiritual journey – I think we

⁴ Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St John of the Cross*, second revised edition (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1991), p.181.

⁵ Foster, *Contemplative Prayer*, p.5.

will know something of what this metaphor points us towards. We'll know the sense of finding ourselves at times 'in a cloud', drawn into that 'central magnetic area of obscurity' and we'll know the need for courage to stay faithful and to wait in unknowing. We'll know the occasional dawning of a deeper insight and sense of necessity – something we must do, something we must be true to. And though the light from our garments may not dazzle those around us, though our faces may not shine like the sun, if we remain faithful to our way we will be transfigured, and drawn with Jesus down the mountain to serve the world.