



18 February 2012

On Blessing III – Mark 9. 2-9

Sarah Bachelard

There is a story told by the desert mothers and fathers, the monastics of the early church. 'Abba (Father) Lot went to see Abba Joseph and said to him: "Abba, as far as I can I say my little office, I fast a little, I pray and meditate, I live in peace and as far as I can I purify my thoughts. What else can I do?" Then the old man stood up and stretched his hands toward heaven. His fingers became like ten lamps of fire and he said to him, "If you will, you can become all flame"'.

Three times in Mark's gospel we glimpse directly the flame of the divine life, the magnitude of the reality behind the world we know. At Jesus's baptism in the Jordan, he sees 'the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove' and he hears a voice, 'You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased'. At the moment of Jesus's death, the curtain of the temple, symbol of the divide between God and creation, is 'torn in two, from top to bottom' and Jesus is recognised by the centurion 'facing him' as God's Son. And then there is this event – the Transfiguration. Between baptism and crucifixion, at the turning point of the gospel narrative, Jesus goes with Peter, James and John up a high mountain and is 'transfigured before them', named once more as 'my Son, the Beloved'. Three times we glimpse what the poet George Herbert called 'Easter in ordinarie' – the divine life shining, breaking through into our world.

We have been exploring these last weeks the meaning of blessing, which is another way of asking what happens when we encounter and are encountered by God. We have seen that this encounter is always life-giving, but that it may also be deeply confronting. To enter into truer, fuller life may mean stripping away distortions, illusions and self-possession and, as we saw in last week's story of Jacob

wrestling, the struggle to become who God calls us to be may go by way of darkness and wounding. Today we glimpse that this truer, fuller life has no limits. We glimpse that the deep meaning of blessing is transformation, even – to use the language of the Orthodox tradition – deification. To be blessed, to allow ourselves to be drawn further and further into encounter with the living God, is to become more and more ‘like God’, all flame, shining like the sun.

This sounds like what we most want; it sounds like the fulfilment of our religious commitment and spiritual journey, the point of it all. But what I keep discovering about myself is that actually this prospect terrifies me; actually I resist being drawn into it, all the way. Like Abba Lot, using his tidy religious observances as cover, like Peter, James and John trying to contain the magnitude of God’s presence, distracting themselves with plans to do the ‘right’ thing, I want to keep the encounter (and myself) small, manageable. I want blessing, but not like that. I want to know God, but not to be consumed, not to share in God’s very life. Each time I am invited deeper, I resist all over again.

What am I so terrified of? I think my fear has different faces. Partly it is fear of losing control: the vulnerability of yielding utterly, without reserve, without conditions. Partly it is the fear of the Lord that is the beginning of wisdom: the suddenly acute consciousness of my unworthiness, of the egotism and self-satisfaction that contaminates all that I am and do, and my unwillingness to be ‘seen’ like that. And partly, maybe mostly, it is fear of the magnitude of the possibility that is set before me: the invitation to a disorientingly larger me, free-falling into God to live from the resources of God’s own life. ‘If you will, you can become all flame’.

Because this reality is so overwhelming for us, and yielding to it so terrifying, we need to be inducted into it. There can be moments, epiphanies – the Transfiguration, Paul’s encounter on the road to Damascus, the disciples on the way to Emmaus. But mostly and necessarily our transformation by blessing happens over time. It happens as we yield ourselves in prayer and silence, consenting at least for

that time to be naked and seen. It happens as we surrender to God in the crises of our lives, trusting that in the darkness and stripping, God is bringing something new to birth. And it happens as we share in the Eucharist, where the invitation to live from God's life is enacted bodily.

There is an old understanding of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus as God's joke on the powers of darkness. It looks as though betrayal, fear and hate have triumphed, quenched the divine life; but actually it is the other way around. The resurrection, the life and love of God, breaks the power of death from within. To share in the Eucharist has something of this dynamic. At the Last Supper, on the night of his betrayal, Jesus gives himself to his disciples in bread and wine, apparently defeated, dismembered. But the resurrection overturns this defeat, and redeems his friends' betrayal: and when *we* share this meal with Jesus, as we take his deathless life into ourselves, we are transformed from within – as we remember him, so we ourselves are re-remembered – our failures forgiven, our selves drawn towards wholeness, to radical sharing in the life of God and so in one another. 'We who are many are one body, for we all share in the one bread'.

As in meditation, mostly we do not *experience* anything as we eat the bread and drink the cup. We don't have visions, or see the communion of saints, or the veil torn open. But it *is* open and we *are* in the presence of all those who dwell in God – the Eucharist happens in what Richard Rohr has called 'deep time', the eternal trans-temporal reality of past, present and future. The Eucharist is what Transfiguration looks like 'in ordinarie' – Christ communicating and making shareable the life of God. As we glimpse that reality we may be tempted, like Peter, James and John to cover and distract ourselves by busy-ness with words and thoughts, avoiding our fear of being fully present, exposed to its transforming power and radical blessing. But Christ's gift of himself invites us to give ourselves, Christ's presence in this meal invites us to be present too. Come then – do not be afraid.