

The Heavens Declare (Mark 8. 27-37)

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This week I visited an elderly member of our community. She has limited mobility and suffers constant pain as a consequence of a serious car accident some months ago. Much of her time, she says, she spends praying – meditating, contemplating an image of Christ, simply being with God and listening to others. We sat quietly at her dining room table and she looked out the window to the sky, the clouds, the branches of tall eucalypts moving in the breeze, the shrubs in her drive way. And she told me, I can see God when I look outside, when I look at the trees, the flowers, the sky, the wind. Maybe, she said, that's why I don't get lonely.

'The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims God's handiwork'. There's an apocryphal story about Yuri Gagarin, the Russian cosmonaut who was the first person to journey into outer space. Supposedly, on his return to earth, Gagarin said that he had not seen God. It later emerged these weren't his words. They were attributed to him by then Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, who had his own agenda. But this way of conceiving what it might mean to see God, or not, is too crude. For whether we peer into outer space or gaze from a window in suburban Canberra, God is never just 'out there' as an object of perception alongside all the other objects in the universe. To come to see God in the life of the world is to see in a different way, at a different level. Just as to come to see God in the dusty figure of a first-century itinerant teacher is to see in a different way, at a different level. But what way of seeing is this? And how do we learn it?

Today's gospel reading is usually seen as a turning point in Jesus' story. Till now, he's been moving (not very systematically) around the regions of Galilee, Judea and beyond. He's been accompanied by his disciples – a group of followers he invited to live with, learn from and witness to him. Often he's attracted much larger

gatherings of people who came to hear him speak or to seek a benefit, as well as those who were suspicious of his teaching, casting doubt on his credibility and authority. By now, his disciples have been with Jesus over an extended period; they've seen him interact with a wide range of people from the socially outcast to the socially dominant, Jews and Gentiles, healthy and sick, able and disabled, women, children, men; they've seen him act to heal, restore and free, as well as to challenge and transgress.

There comes the day when Jesus asks them what they make of it all, what they make of him. 'Who do people say that I am?' They answered, 'Some say, John the Baptist and others, Elijah and still others, one of the prophets'. But now comes the real question. 'He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?"'. And Peter makes a breakthrough. 'You are the Messiah'. Not just another teacher, a wise guide or holy man, not even one of the prophets come back to life. 'You are the Messiah', the anointed, the one we have been waiting for. Or, in the language of the later tradition, you are the 'one in whom God is fully active, fully "embodied" – incarnate'.¹

It's an extraordinary insight. But what does it mean? And what is it that enables Peter to recognize it? What does he now see in Jesus that he didn't see before, and that many never do?

I said earlier that to 'see God' in the life of the world is not to see an object, another item alongside all the other items in the universe. God is not at the same level as material reality. Rather, according to our theological tradition, 'God' is the name we give to 'the action or agency that makes everything else active'. God is the Creator, the energy, ground and source of all that is. To see God is to recognize this originating agency in and through the life of the world. A bit like the way you might see the artist in a work of art or piece of music. At one level, there's nothing to see *except* the painting, nothing to hear *except* the music. But for those with eyes to see and ears to hear, the creative work itself reveals and communicates the intelligence

¹ Rowan Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), p.xii.

and love of the artist. So to see the artist in their art is to see simultaneously the work and its creator; just as to apprehend God in the life of the world is to see both world and God at once, a kind of double vision.²

It seems something similar is going on in the New Testament's recognition of Jesus. To proclaim God as uniquely present and active in him is not to imagine some extra-terrestrial or supernatural being disguised in human flesh. Rather it's to recognize in this human person, in this particular, finite life, someone who is living simultaneously 'out of the depths of divine life', someone who is uninterruptedly in communion with God's action and freedom, while never ceasing to share the life of the world.³ And to be with him, to come to know him, is to discover how God acts to generate life in others. 'If you have seen me, you have seen the Father', Jesus says.

Till now, in the gospel story, Jesus' incarnation of God's presence and action has been evident in the authority of his speech and the healing effect of his touch which has restored sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, belonging to the outcast. But now, comes a harder and deeper lesson, for Jesus is drawn not just to meet individual need. He wills to make a way through the blockages in human being that characteristically inhibit our capacity to share his communion with God. These are blockages mostly sourced in fear and lack of trust, in the creaturely impulse to self-sufficiency and control, in our refusal of dependence and receptivity. So Jesus begins to teach his disciples that he must enter into this refusal, this knot of fear and threatenedness, bringing the possibility of uninterrupted communion even into this place, so as to break it open from within. He begins to teach his disciples he must suffer and die at the hands of the powers that be.

But this is hard to grasp and Peter's flash of insight has only taken him so far. This is not, in his understanding, how the Messiah comes or how God acts. And so he takes Jesus aside and rebukes him, as if he's the one who knows. Jesus' answering rebuke seems harsh but it's no more than the truth. For 'Satan' represents that

² Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, p.5.

³ Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, pp.5-6.

which resists life's fullness and release; Satan is the lie that life can be possessed without being given away. 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things'. For, says Jesus, until our minds, hearts and wills are joined to the energy of God's being, we will remain estranged from our own fullest and truest life. 'For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?'

So how do we connect at this level? How may we be joined to God's intelligence and love? How do we come to recognize God's presence and action in the world? In Jesus? In ourselves?

The authentic and transfiguring vision of God isn't something we can force or imagine; it's not something we project or will ourselves into experiencing. The community member I visited this week told me she spent a lot of time contemplating an image of Christ – but it wasn't an icon or devotional picture. It was a photograph of a woodland in snow. But seen in a certain way, the branches of the trees and the white spaces of the snow resolved into a human face, the face of Christ. I couldn't see it at first. My friend said she'd seen it straight away. For some it's like that. But if you think about the disciples with Jesus, although something drew them to him from the beginning, it took time, nearer acquaintance, patient attention and openness, for them to come to fuller apprehension.

And when deeper sight came, it came as gift. In Matthew's version of this story, Jesus says in response to Peter's confession of his identity, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven'. (Matthew 16. 17). There's grace at work here, just as there's grace in the dawning awareness of the sustaining action of God in and through the life of the world. And it seems to me that, if we have glimpsed in Jesus and in the life of the world something that draws us, some beckoning to fuller knowing and vision, then this is where the humility and patience of contemplative practice is key. We don't demand the gift be given, we don't try to make something happen or indulge in fantasy. We wait quietly in unknowing; we look gently, we make ourselves available,

we let ourselves be. This is the way of simplicity which opens ultimately, we trust, into fuller knowledge and love of God, such that our lives too begin to enjoy and communicate the active mercy at the heart of creation. May it be so. Amen.