

Sunday, February 16, 2025
The Sixth Sunday After The Epiphany

Festal Eucharist
11:00 am

+

A Sermon by
The Rev. Canon Carl Turner

on
1 Corinthians 15:12–20; Luke 6:17–26

+

Coming down to a level place

Some words of Archbishop Rowan Williams:

God intended that human beings should grow into such love for him and such confidence in him that they could rightly be called God's sons and daughters. Human beings have let go of that identity, abandoned it, forgotten it or corrupted it. And when Jesus arrives on the scene he restores humanity to where it should be. But that in itself means that Jesus, as he restores humanity 'from within' (so to speak), has to come down into the chaos of our human world. Jesus has to come down fully to our level, to where things are shapeless and meaningless, in a state of vulnerability and unprotectedness, if real humanity is to come to birth. ^[1]

The incarnation, that we celebrated at Christmas, and have been reflecting on through this Epiphany season is, quite simply, God **coming down to our level**, which is utterly incredible and also very risky.

Those of you who know Greek and Roman mythology know that the gods, even though powerful, could sometimes get themselves into scrapes with humankind and with one another and so the King of the gods, that the Greeks called Zeus and the Romans called Jupiter, decided that the gods should live high above mortals on Mount Olympus. Greek and Roman mythology is, however, full of stories of the gods coming down to our level and interacting with mortals. I was reading again the other day, the story of Zeus and one of his human lovers, the priestess Semele, with whom he fathered a child called Dionysus – the creator of wine. When Zeus' wife, Hera, the Queen of the gods put doubt into Semele's mind that she had actually met Zeus, Semele persuaded Zeus into giving his word that he would grant her any request. Her request was to see Zeus in his full glory and not in any kind of lesser form. Although he tried to refuse, Zeus was true to his word, and the story goes that as he revealed his true self, the revelation of his true glory destroyed Semele.

Now, in the Hebrew scriptures, the one true God inhabits heaven but, nevertheless, interacts with humankind, particularly through his angelic messengers, his Holy Spirit, and through his intervention in human history through mighty acts. In the Old Testament, when God appears to mortals and reveals his glory through such acts, it is described by theologians as a *Theophany* – a revelation of God. But, of course, God never revealed himself fully, only partially. Moses asked the Lord if he could see his glory and was told by God that if he did so, he would not live. The glory of the Lord was revealed many

times to the Hebrew people; the Hebrew word for this revelation of God's glory is *Shekinah*. The pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire at the time of the Exodus; the cloud and lightening over Mount Horeb; the cloud descending over the Tabernacle; the 'still small voice' that Elijah witnessed; the glory of the Lord filling Solomon's first Temple at its dedication; the dramatic visions of Isaiah and Ezekiel of the Temple; these are all revelations of God's glory, but they are all *partial* revelations.

What sets Christianity apart from all the world religions is the incarnation of Jesus Christ in which God's glory is *fully* revealed. The beginning of John's Gospel says it all: "*the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.*" (John 1:14).

In two weeks, we will hear again the story of the Transfiguration. Jesus will take Peter, James, and John, up a mountain and, there, he will be transfigured and reveal his glory. However, unlike Moses, Peter and James and John will be allowed to see God's glory fully revealed in the face of Jesus Christ, and they will not die. In his great 'High Priestly' prayer to the Father in John's Gospel, Jesus prays these words: "*Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory.*" (John 17:24a) And as Paul says to the Corinthian Church, "*it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.*" (2 Corinthians 4:6).

But, as I said earlier, this revelation of glory is risky; after his Transfiguration, Jesus comes down from the mountain – **to a level place** – and turns his face towards Jerusalem and his impending passion and death. John's Gospel also tells us that immediately after his High priestly prayer when Jesus had prayed that his Father would reveal his glory to the disciples, Jesus went with those disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane, where he was betrayed by Judas. It seems ironic in a world where power or celebrity status is craved for that God in Christ actually made himself *vulnerable* by revealing his glory. In John's Gospel, the greatest revelation of God's glory is the crucifixion which the author of the Fourth Gospel describes as the *glorification* of Jesus.

In today's Gospel, Jesus comes down from the mountain where he has been praying and Luke tells us that he 'stood on a level place.' Jesus came down to our level and healed the sick and challenged the unclean spirits. Luke tells us that power came out from him that became the source of this healing.

Now that he is on a level place, Jesus looks at his disciples and gives them some teaching; four beatitudes and four woes. This passage is often contrasted with what we call 'the Sermon on the Mount' in Matthew's Gospel, and is known as 'the Sermon on the Plain.'

Just as the glory of God is not like human concepts of glory, so Jesus seems to say things that are counter-intuitive. How can you be blessed if you are poor, hungry, sad, or persecuted? Don't we live in a world where the rich, the well-fed, the cheerful, and the famous are the ones that are the blessed? In the vision of the Kingdom of God presented by Jesus, these things are turned on their head. Jesus gives a vision where there will be a mutuality between people and nations; a world where people cooperate with God rather than give him lip-service; a world where to be a follower of Jesus is to make a difference. And Jesus reveals this through his own example of unselfish love; in his ministry of servanthood in which he washed his disciples' feet; in eating with sinners; in seeking the marginalized and not the famous; in choosing to call his disciples *friends* rather than servants; in choosing to embrace the leper. In all of these things, Jesus gave us a radical example of how the world could look under the sovereignty of God's love and not the twisted notions of human power. We, too, are called to

come down to a level place; and to pray that our world leaders, our politicians, our religious leaders and, perhaps, even those who wish us harm would do the same.

Some words of Bishop Tom Wright:

God doesn't sort out the mess by pressing a button or pulling a lever upstairs. He comes down to the place of sorrow, shame, sickness and death and takes the worst of it upon himself. This story is so dark, opaque even, that theologians and preachers are often tempted to turn it into something more obviously believable. That doesn't work. St Paul said that the gospel was 'foolishness to the Greeks', and that's still how it appears. But, as he went on to say, 'for us who believe it is God's power and wisdom'. ^[2]

References

- 1 'Being Christian: Baptism, Bible, Eucharist, Prayer' Rowan Williams page 3-4
 - 2 'What Would It Look Like If God Was In Charge?' from *N.T. Wright online*.
-