

The Glory of the Unseen God

Exodus 33:12-23; Revelation 1:10-18; Matthew 17:1-13

Chris Gousmett

When Jesus took his small band of select disciples with him up the mountain, little did they realize that they were to participate in an experience given to few in this life. There are only a few occasions in Scripture where people were privileged with a glimpse of the unseen God. As Isaiah says, “Truly you are a God who hides himself.” (Isa 45:15) We have focused so much on God’s revelation of himself to us that we can overlook the fact that as much as he has shown of himself to us, even more has been hidden from us. And this comment, that “You are a God who hides himself” comes from Isaiah, whose vision of the Lord in glory in the temple is as spectacular as any of the visions of God recorded in the Scriptures. Other prophets also saw God in glory, including Ezekiel, whose unusual and perplexing vision is extremely difficult to interpret.

Another unusual experience was that of Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, who went up to the Mount of Sinai, where they saw God, and not only that, the elders had a meal in front of the God of Glory (Exodus 24:9-11).

The passage we have heard read to us today from Exodus records how Moses desired to see God. After extracting a promise from God that his presence would go with the people of Israel in their journey through the desert to the land that they had been promised, Moses had the audacity to say to God, “Now show me your glory.” God was favourably disposed to Moses, whom the Scriptures describe as the friend of God, the only one he would speak to face to face as to a friend (Exodus 33:11). And the elders of Israel, it says, “*saw God, and they ate and drank.*” Now in the next section of Exodus 33 it says that God told Moses, “*You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.*” God does not show himself directly to any one, but chooses when and how he will reveal or disclose himself to us. So then, what is seen in such experiences is not God in his full glory, but a revelation of himself in creaturely, humanly comprehensible form.

So when Moses had gone up the mountain to meet with the Lord, he was given a revelation of God, who came down in a cloud and proclaimed his name: *“The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.”* (Exodus 34:6-7) After passing by Moses while making this proclamation, Moses, who was prevented from seeing God in his glory, was able to see the afterglow lingering from God passing by.

Another who had such an experience of God was Elijah. After doing battle with Jezebel’s false prophets, and seeing the fire of God descend from heaven to consume his sacrifice, he ended up fleeing for his life from Jezebel, the wicked queen of Israel. He ended up at Mount Horeb, or Sinai, where God said to him, *“What are you doing here, Elijah?”* He was told to go outside the cave before the presence of the Lord. And then, the Scriptures record, *“a great and powerful wind tore the mountain apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, ‘What are you doing here, Elijah?’”*

Elijah had enough sense to realize, when he heard the gentle whisper, that this was God come to remonstrate with him. There was a great and powerful wind, a mighty earthquake, a flaming fire, but these did not reveal his God. It was only in the quiet whisper that God made himself known to Elijah. We cannot choose how God will reveal himself to us. We cannot decide for ourselves what constitutes a revelation of God. It is for God to make himself known however he chooses, and for us to accept the means that he does choose for making himself known. Without his self-revelation in this way, we would know nothing of God; we would have no knowledge of him; we would be in ignorance. The most we could know, as Paul recounts in the first chapter of Romans, is that God exists, and that by his divine power he has made all

things. This does not mean that we can deduce anything at all about God from the creation; there is no natural theology we can develop from our own understanding. There is no doctrine we can read off the creation that would tell us anything about God. No, all we can know, as Paul says, is the eternal power and divine nature of God who has made all things.

What then can we know about God? Only that which he has chosen to make known to us. And it is in the few instances when God has revealed himself to human beings that we can catch a glimpse of the glory of the unseen God. We often focus on God revealing himself in Jesus, and overlook the fact that we could equally well speak of God concealing himself in Jesus. Those who met him did not, even after witnessing his marvelous deeds, and listening to his wisdom and insight, think to themselves, maybe this man is God's revelation to us! There were others who were famous for the profound teaching they were giving in Israel at the time; others who performed miraculous deeds; others who claimed to be the messiah and gathered bands of followers around them. In fact, there were so many claiming to be the messiah that this no doubt one of the reasons Jesus repeatedly told his disciples not to refer to him in those terms. And in our story this morning, we read that Jesus forbade his disciples to disclose what they had seen until after his resurrection from the dead.

Jesus was not merely being modest; he was being prudent and careful. After all, to have claimed publicly to be the Messiah would not have resulted in the people of Israel saying, "At last, after all this time, the Messiah has come." No, the more likely response would have been, "Not another one. How long do you think **you** will last when the Romans find out?" For most of the others who claimed to be the messiah had a relatively short life expectancy as a result, and many thousands of their followers were slaughtered by the Romans. To claim to be the messiah was not simply to stake a claim as a religious leader, it was to challenge the power and authority of the Roman empire, as well as the authority of the aristocracy, the priesthood and the rulers in Israel such as Herod.

It was not immediately obvious to the people who met Jesus that he was someone special. His teaching offended and upset many; his miraculous deeds were met with skepticism about his credentials (but not about the miracles themselves; even his

enemies never denied that these were real); and his followers were often frustrated and perplexed by his refusal to accept their eagerness to make him a messiah even if he had not claimed to be such himself. Those who met Jesus did not perceive him to be God, even with the many miracles he performed. They certainly accepted that the power of God was working through him, and that he had a gift for teaching and a radically different understanding of the Law of Moses. But the idea that he was God? By coming in the flesh, it did not make it easier for human beings to come to recognize and acknowledge Jesus as the incarnation of God. In fact, it made it harder. How could a good, covenant-abiding Jew, who confessed that there was one God, acknowledge Jesus as God? The Jewish statement of faith in Deuteronomy is: “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” Such a confession made it impossible for a Jew to even imagine that Jesus could be this God, and it was only after the resurrection that it became evident to the disciples that Jesus was truly God come in the flesh. Conversely, how could a pagan, who was used to the idea of many gods appearing in all manner of places and guises, accept that there was only one God who had come in the flesh only in this Jew, one of a despised nation that had been conquered and subjugated by the Romans, someone born in poor circumstances in an obscure corner of the Empire? Surely if a god was to come in the flesh he would turn up in Rome, the centre and pivot of all things. And in fact, the most prominent claims by human beings to be divine were made by the emperors, with the later ones even being worshipped in temples set up in their name, with a priesthood dedicated to their cult, and regular sacrifices and festivals promoting and proclaiming their divinity. For Jesus to be accepted as an incarnation of God, and on top of that, the only incarnation of the one true God, was to risk offending the most powerful figure in the empire and the whole social, political and religious system built up around him.

So to say that Jesus was the revelation in the flesh of the true God was to go against all prevailing wisdom at the time. And in fact, it is to go against the prevailing wisdom of the ages since, and today it can be especially offensive to many to make this claim. It is not self-evident that Jesus is the incarnation of God. This can be known only if it is revealed to us by the Holy Spirit. It is only in faith that we can see and accept that Jesus is indeed God. It is hidden from those who do not have eyes to see, and from those who do not believe. God has indeed concealed himself in Jesus.

And so we come to the account of Jesus, who took his small band of disciples up the mountain. And there Jesus was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes blazed with light. And on top of this, Moses and Elijah appeared and spoke with him. Why Moses and Elijah? Well, the passages we have considered earlier may indicate that there is some significance in this. Moses, the one through whom God gave the Law to Israel, with whom God spoke face to face, who had the temerity to ask God, “*Show me your glory.*” And Elijah, the prototype of the prophets, was the one to whom God revealed himself on Horeb in the gentle whisper. These two, then, appear again and are present with Jesus when he is transformed and revealed in his glory. Moses was unable to see God’s glory face to face; he saw only the afterglow following God’s passing by him while he was hidden in the cleft of the rock. Elijah was reluctant to see God; he had been hiding in a cave far away from everyone; he did not want to be found: he was looking for peace and quiet. And instead he was terrified by a powerful wind which shattered the rocks, an earthquake which rocked the mountain, and a blazing fire. He went out and covered his head with his cloak; the last thing he wanted just then was a revelation of God!

But here he was with Moses, seeing Jesus revealed in all his glory. And then a cloud came down and the voice spoke from heaven: reminiscences of the experiences of both Moses, who saw God in the cloud, and Elijah, who heard God speak softly to him. And again, the voice recalls the experience of Jesus at his baptism, when God spoke from the cloud, affirming that this really was his chosen son, the one with whom he was pleased.

It is clear from the text that what the disciples saw was a vision. That is, we do not think that Moses and Elijah returned from the dead to speak with Jesus; they appeared in the vision which God gave to the disciples. And this vision was directed to the disciples; it was not something that was available to anyone else who happened to be in the area at the time. We can see this confirmed from the instances in Scripture where God spoke, or revealed something in visible form, to those chosen to receive the revelation, while others present saw or heard nothing, or at most were only aware that something was happening; they did not understand what was being revealed. For instance, when Jesus prayed before his death, “*Father, glorify your name!*”, while

speaking with his disciples, a voice came from heaven saying, *“I have glorified it, and will glorify it again.”* The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him. It is evident, though, that the disciples heard what was said, as Jesus told them, *“This voice was for your benefit, not mine.”* (John 12:28-30)

Similarly, the conversion of Saul resulted from a vision of Jesus in glory speaking to him. Saul recognized this was God, as any good Jew would do. What no doubt surprised him was that God revealed himself as Jesus, the one whose followers he was persecuting as he believed they were leading the people of Israel astray. Those with Saul heard a sound but saw nothing: the revelation was not given to them. (Acts 9:7)

A vision, then, is a means whereby God has chosen on occasion to reveal himself to various people, but is directed to those to whom he is revealing himself. Others may hear a sound or see a light, but do not understand or recognize what is being made known to the ones receiving the vision.

Is this of any relevance other than a curiosity of the biblical account? Yes, indeed, for it is one reason, among many, that counters the idea that we can come to know God through anything other than his own revelation of himself to us. And the revelations of God are given to some but not to others: God chooses those to whom he will reveal himself. We cannot from our own efforts find out God; he is a God who hides himself, and reveals himself only to those to whom he chooses to make himself known. And the primary means by which God has chosen to reveal himself to us is through his own incarnation in Jesus. Through Jesus, God was making himself known to us. And he was revealed himself to us through the Scriptures, which are the sole authoritative account of who Jesus was, what he did and said, and how he calls us to respond to him. We cannot choose to understand or interpret Jesus for ourselves apart from, or in conflict with what the Scriptures record. He is not simply a man of insight, vision and integrity who inspires us to imitate him. God is not the name we give to our most exalted experiences or highest values in life. He is not the ultimate Valentine, who loves all, accepts all and forgives all, regardless of repentance, faith and trust in him. God has made himself known to us in Jesus, revealing himself as he

chose, and expressing himself through the Scriptures as our reliable and trustworthy guide to him.

Secondly, it is significant for our expectations for the future life. Following death, we have the promise that God will raise from the dead all those who trust in him and love him, to share with him the renewed creation for all eternity. God himself will come down from heaven to the new earth to dwell with his creatures in intimate and close companionship. But even then, we will not see God as the supreme creator and eternal being in all his superb glory. No, what we will see, as creatures, even though we will be redeemed, resurrected and immortalized creatures, will be the permanent revelation of God to us in creaturely comprehensible form. And supremely, this will be through the bodily presence of Jesus, God incarnate, the expression of the divine being given to us so that through him we can know God. As Paul says in Colossians, Jesus is the image of the invisible God. In him all the fullness of God dwells, and he is himself God.

The mediaeval theologians used to debate over when and how we humans would be able to receive what was called the “beatific vision”, the sight of God in all his divine glory. They argued over whether this was accessible through the eyes of resurrected bodies, or whether it was a spiritual sight that could be seen with the eyes of the soul only. Would it be accessible immediately after death, or would we need to wait until after the last judgement? Would it be the same for all, or would it have grades depending on the level of sanctity that had been attained? This debate went seriously wrong right from the start, for these theologians failed to recognize that our vision of God in his glory is a revelation granted to us, not a sight of God in his divine and eternal being. He cannot be seen by creatures in that way; even after the resurrection we will be able to see only in creaturely ways, and God will reveal himself to us in a way that we can comprehend.

Supremely, then, we have Jesus as the incarnation of God, present in bodily form throughout his life, and now raised from the dead and ascended into heaven, where he remains fully human, fully bodily, truly incarnate in every way, and thus an accessible, comprehensible revelation of God to us when we too are raised and glorified along with him, sharing with him the eternal kingdom. Jesus is God in the

flesh, one of us but also the eternal Son of God: the one through whom God has made himself known, not just in a vision, or by giving a text, but through sharing our lives with us.

But not only do we have authoritative accounts of Jesus in human form as he came and lived amongst us, and his death, resurrection and ascension into heaven to be seated at God's right hand. We also have the vision of John at the start of the book of Revelation, which shows us a rather different side of Jesus. Here he is shown in all his glory as the ascended Son of God, ruler of the universe, king of kings and judge of all. John, whose relationship with the earthly Jesus was possibly the closest of all the disciples, was terrified when he saw his Lord displayed in such majestic splendour. This was no man of insight who inspires good works; this was no social radical urging changes to the way we lived; this was the one who had taken on the devil and all the power of sin and death and had defeated them once and for all. This was the conqueror, the victor, the king over all things, and John was terrified. And so would we be if we too saw Jesus revealed in such a way.

This is in spite of the fact that John was present on the mountain where Jesus was transfigured and shone like the sun. It is in spite of John having seen Jesus risen from the dead, transformed in ways we cannot imagine, still recognizably the human Jesus, but not the same in strange and inexpressible ways. John had also seen Jesus as he ascended into heaven, and spoke with the angels who came to witness the event. In spite of all this, when Jesus was revealed to him as the king of kings and judge of all, he was terrified and fell to the ground. John had been terrified at the transfiguration on the mountain, but even so, the transformation of Jesus at that time was nothing compared to this!

The revelation of God in Jesus is not as a moral example, an inspiring teacher, a good man, but the revelation of God himself, so that he could make himself known to us in a way we could comprehend and relate to. God dwells in all his fullness in Jesus, and has chosen this incarnation as the way, the only way, by which we can come to know him. God reveals himself to those whom he chooses to receive the revelation, and chooses the means whereby he will reveal himself. He has chosen to do this in and through Jesus, and has given us the Scriptures as the only authoritative text to testify

and interpret this revelation of himself to us. Unless we follow the Scriptures carefully, we will fail to recognize or understand what God is doing in and through Jesus. And we have no direct access to Jesus himself in this life save through the witness and testimony of the Scriptures, as these are enlightened to our hearts by the Holy Spirit. We cannot come up with our own beliefs about Jesus, or God, independently of the Scriptures. We cannot resort to rational thought about God, the principal failing of the modernist approach to knowledge. We cannot resort to our own spiritual experience of what we perceive to be God, the principal error of our post-modernist environment. Both modernism and post-modernism take humanity as the centre, and accommodate our beliefs about God to that. But we are called to focus our lives, our thoughts, our behaviour around God as he has made himself known in Jesus, and to live out from that centre.

May we find God in Jesus through the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, so that we will be centred in him, and made new and whole through his saving grace. May we follow him throughout this life, and come to his kingdom to share his glory and to behold his face forever. Amen.

Chris Gousmett

20 February 2005