

Martin White. 29th June 08. Revelation 1:9-18

Encountering Jesus – John on Patmos

There is an idea that some people have about God that He has created the universe a bit like a clock that He has lovingly and carefully made and wound up, and left to tick away following His natural laws, while He stands back and watches as it carries on working without needing Him to intervene.

Actually I don't believe this. I believe that He has created the universe, but has also stayed involved in it – He is the God who answers prayers and heals and is Immanuel – God with us, in our daily lives, whether or not we always perceive or understand what He is doing.

He is the God who breaks into History; Ultimately through coming and 'taking on flesh' and being born as Jesus – perfect God and perfect man; but also by breaking into our lives and revealing His Glory.

Years ago, someone read me an account out of a Christian book of two pastors who were out early one morning walking along a canal somewhere in the countryside and praying, when they saw the glory of God; both of them were overwhelmed by God's glory and both fell down, very afraid. Later, when they were able to walk back towards their houses, they met some people who ran away from them, because, as they found when they got home, their faces were shining. (I think this comes from 'Knowing God' by Bruce Milne, but I haven't been able to find it)

A friend of mine was walking along an old railway line in Bedford with Dave Stroud – my previous church leader, when he became aware of God's Glory. He fell down and said that he felt like he wanted to be as low as he could get and said it was almost unbearable and he felt like he wanted to be as low to the ground as he could be. Afterwards, he couldn't walk on his own and needed to be helped back home. For a day or two he was unable to speak and was trembling, and for a long time afterwards he wasn't able to talk about his experience. (This was a very sensible friend, not given to exaggeration, who is now a leader in a church)

And the Bible contains several accounts of times when God has broken in and appeared, to various people, over many years, in many situations, but with the same authentic, devastating results:

- Isaiah had a vision of God's Glory and was left shouting out "Woe to me, I am ruined!"
- Ezekiel "fell face down"
- Job said "I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes"
- As God's Glory fell as Solomon's Temple was dedicated, "the whole of the nation knelt on the pavement with their faces to the floor and worshipped."
- Saul (Paul) - suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him and he fell to the ground

I want to look today at an encounter John had with the Risen Jesus:

At this point, John is probably about 90 years old and the last surviving disciple – all the others had been martyred. He is on Patmos (a Greek island which is a holiday destination, but at the time was a place like Guantanamo Bay – away from public view and the legal system or Robben Island) where he had probably been for about 2 years, working as a slave in a quarry, if he was able enough at that age.



(It is interesting that Jesus appeared to John whilst he was being persecuted and going through trials; if you are going through a hard time and facing opposition, I hope Jesus will stir faith in you this morning)

I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, which said: "Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea."

I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone "like a son of man," dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a

golden sash around his chest. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.

When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades. (Revelation 1:9-18 NIV)

I love this account of someone meeting with God! And like most of the accounts of people in the Bible meeting with God, it left the person involved – John, completely undone – “I fell at His feet as though dead.”

Here in Revelation, John, one of Jesus’ closest friends – “The disciple who Jesus loved” who had been there at the Transfiguration and after the Resurrection and the Ascension, and Pentecost, and who had followed Jesus for about 60 years by the time this happened, is utterly blown away by Jesus’ Glory.

You might think that if anyone was going to be ‘used to’ God’s Glory, it might be him, but he can’t even stand!

David Pawson says this:

The voice commanding him to write was followed by an overwhelming vision of Jesus as John had never seen Him before; snow-white hair, blazing eyes, thundering voice, sharp tongue, glowing feet. Even on the Mount of Transfiguration, he had never looked like this. No wonder John swooned, until he heard some very familiar words – “Don’t be afraid.” (David Pawson, p.180)

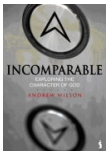
As I was reading through this description of what John saw, I don’t know if you were trying to picture it?

As a young Christian, I tried to draw the picture it describes, which is very hard!

Through history, there have been a few famous attempts to put this into picture form, the most famous by someone called Durer.



I think it is a good thing to use our minds and our creativity to think about passages in the Bible, but I think with this, and other passages that try to describe God, the point is that He is indescribable.



Andrew Wilson, in his book “Incomparable” says this:

The most dramatic picture of the glory of God in the scriptures in my view is Ezekiel chapter 1, where the images are wonderful; windstorms, clouds, fire, gleaming metal, lightning, sparkling bronze, lions, oxen, eagles, wheels, eyes, rushing waters, an expanse of crystal, a sapphire throne, one with human appearance, rainbows. Yet after using the full range of earthly imagery, Ezekiel has hardly scratched the surface. “Such” he concludes, “Was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of Yahweh.” God’s glory looked a little bit similar to something that was ever so slightly like this, but words cannot explain how. The glory of Yahweh is indescribable... Our understanding of God is riddled with things we cannot explain properly, and this makes Him more glorious, not less. (Andrew Wilson, p.283-284)

John sees the same Jesus that he had rested his head on as they had eaten together, but here He is – different, ‘other’, holy.

When Wycliffe Bible translators went to countries in Africa to translate the Bible into different languages, they made the decision to translate the ‘easier’ parts of the Bible first (the Gospels etc.), and to leave this difficult book – Revelation, to the end. When they finally translated Revelation, they found that people quickly understood it – and seemed to get a better grasp of it than the translators had had, because the African cultures they were working in had a tradition of symbolism in their story telling.

So let’s look at what John saw:

Symbolic language

- Dressed in a robe reaching down to His feet – (priestly robes)
- Golden sash around his chest – (priest/authority)
- Head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow – (wisdom & dignity. It was also a Recognition of Jesus' deity, as people would have heard it echo Daniel 7:9) →

"As I looked,
"thrones were set in place,
and the Ancient of Days took his seat.
His clothing was as white as snow;
the hair of his head was white like wool.
His throne was flaming with fire,
and its wheels were all ablaze. (Daniel 7:9 NIV)

- Eyes were like blazing fire (Holiness)
- Feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace (strength & authority)
- Voice was like the sound of rushing waters (authority & power)
- In His right hand were seven stars

Helpfully, later this is explained:

The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches. (1:20)

- Out of His mouth came a sharp, double-edged sword (Power of His words – like a sword that makes things happen Rev 19:5)
- Face was like the sun, shining in all its brilliance.

Andrew Wilson writes a chapter in his book about this, which I want to read:

Read “Jesus shines” (From Incomparable, by Andrew Wilson)

John, who had known the love, here sees the Glory and Holiness of Jesus ‘unveiled’

Here is Jesus, the Great High Priest, with complete authority and wisdom and Holiness and glory and strength and purity, ruling over all things, commanding angels, in unapproachable, unbearable light, standing amongst His Churches

In closing I want to make a few comments about this passage.

1. Jesus is Glorious and ‘other’, but He is also knowable

Not fully yet, although there will be a time, 1 Corinthians 13 says, when we will:

Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.
(1 Corinthians 13:12 NIV)

We don't yet see things clearly. We're squinting in a fog, peering through a mist. But it won't be long before the weather clears and the sun shines bright! We'll see it all then, see it all as clearly as God sees us, knowing him directly just as he knows us! (1 Corinthians 13:12 The Message)

On 11th August 1999 there was a solar eclipse which was visible in the south of England. The country went eclipse-mad and there were lots of ‘experts’ on TV telling people not to look at the sun.

We gave out special “Eclipse glasses” to the children in our school. We told them “You may want to look at the sun, because you are excited, but don’t. You need these glasses to protect your eyes, because your eyes weren’t made to look directly at the sun!”

I have often read this verse with a feeling of disappointment that we can’t see more of God’s Glory now, but actually, He is the One who puts the protection of the fog or the dimly reflecting mirror.

Sometimes, when there is a thick enough layer of cloud, you can look for a bit longer at the sun without harming your eyes (Don’t try this at home!)

These glasses may mean we don't see the 'fullness' of the sun, but we can still see is genuinely the sun.

We may only see dimly, but we do see!

2. We should be careful not to be too 'familiar' with Jesus

John was "the Disciple Jesus loved" (John 13:23), he had seen the Transfiguration, miracles, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, Pentecost etc. & had loved & served & followed Jesus for 60+ years by this point. But I think if you had asked him "What is Jesus like?" he would have said "Holy, Holy, Holy!"

The danger about just thinking of Jesus as our friend (which He is) or gentle (which He is) is that we are left with a 2-dimensional, approachable, but not Holy Saviour.

If we are looking at the sun through dim glasses, we would be foolish if we thought that that was how the sun really was and got 'comfortable' with it and forgot how brilliant it really is.

We need to be careful that we don't 'filter' Jesus, so only the gentler, easier parts of His character come through. It's not up to us to just choose the bits of Jesus we like.

It's not *either* God's Love *or* His Holiness; it's *both and*. John was "The disciple Jesus loved" but here he is, undone by Jesus' unfiltered Holiness. It's good to know God's love, and it's good to know His Holiness; and it's the true, balanced view to see both – to be overwhelmed by His holiness, then hear His voice of love – "Do not be afraid"; to know Him as the God of love, and then to see His Glory revealed.

3. Whether we see His Glory or not, He is still Glorious

Finally, the truth is that whether it's cloudy or brilliant blue skies, the sun is still shining.

Jesus revealed more of Himself and His Glory in this encounter; but as far as we know, this wasn't how John normally encountered of Jesus. But between glimpses of Jesus' Glory – the Transfiguration and here, he had spent his life following Jesus

We should live our lives knowing as much as we can of God's Glory, but we don't need to go from one 'fix' to the next; the truth is that Jesus *is* that glorious all the time. We just don't get to **see** His glory for it to be true.

It is important to know, in these times when we are sensing more of the work of the Holy Spirit – some of us may not see or feel as much as others. It is important for us all to seek Him and expect to encounter Him – He wants us to know Him.

But it is not a competition and we must kill off any voices in our heads that could be the seeds of jealousy – “He always seems to sense God's presence more than me”

God loves His people equally and completely; but He reveals His glory to whoever He chooses.

Whether we are basking in His Glory or struggling through fog, the truth, as John glimpsed, is that Jesus is Holy and radiating Glory.

Pray for an unveiling of God's Glory across the Church.

This isn't 'safe' for:

- **Sin**
- **Compromise**
- **Luke-warmness**

We don't dabble with God's Glory.