



Sermon preached at William Temple Parish Church, Wythenshawe

by the Rev'd Ann Pilkington

Sunday 15th February 2015

It's very good to be back with you this morning and thanks to Stephen for inviting me. I might as well begin with football and get that out of the way, because I know that you have probably been starved of football related sermons since I left! Last Sunday Night I watched the final of the Africa Cup of Nations – two of City's players Yaya Toure and Wilfreid Bony were playing for the Ivory Coast – and what a terrible match it was – the only excitement was the penalty shoot out at the end. The Ivory Coast won, by the way – just in case you didn't know.

A few years ago in 2012 in fact, the Ivory Coast were again in the final where they played Zambia. Like last Sunday's final it wasn't the greatest of games in football terms, but for me it was a very special event. For those of you who don't know, in 1993 the then Zambian football team set off from the Gabonese capital for a World cup qualifier in Senegal. Shortly after take off the plane crashed and the team perished. Only one member of the team of 1993 survived – that was a player called Kalusha Bwalya. At the time he played for PSV Eindhoven and was making his own way to Dakar for the match. And he was at the stadium on that Sunday evening in 2012. Like last Sunday, the match ended in a nil nil draw – and it was the same result after extra time, so it was time for the dreaded penalty shoot out.

By this time the commentators were daring to think that this was Zambia's destiny – because the Ivory Coast had been the red hot favourites to win. A few days earlier the Zambian team had gathered on the beach in Libreville and sang religious songs and laid flowers in the waters where their compatriots had perished.

There was singing again during the penalty shoot out. We saw Zambian players on their knees on the pitch praying. And while their fellow players were taking penalties the rest of the team sang. And the crowd were doing the same – nerve-wracking as it was we saw smiling African faces singing and celebrating as they watched their team draw ever closer to victory. And when victory came the team engulfed Kalusha Bwalya – the best Zambian footballer of all time, and the only member of the 1993 team still alive. It was spoken of in terms of redemption. And for me it was a religious experience – a moment of

transformation as those players – many of whom played for very small clubs, became champions.

This morning's readings are about transformation and for me transformation is happening all around us for most of the time, even at football matches. God transforms the ordinary into the holy sometimes because of us and sometimes in spite of us.

I want to talk a little bit about how Wythenshawe transformed me. When I first got the letter to contact the Revd. Howard Eales with a view to doing my curacy here I was a pastoral assistant at St. John's Moston, and studying on the Northern Ordination Course. Nigel Hawley the Rector got very excited on my behalf because he was very interested in church architecture. And I must admit, although I didn't share his knowledge or enthusiasm about architecture, when Howard first showed me inside this building it took my breath away – and it continues to do so. And for those of us who endured the restoration of the roof (which, would you believe, I'm enduring again at Christ Church) that too was a transforming experience, not just for the building but for each one of us – the water, the acres of plastic sheeting over the pews, Doggy Drew's footprints, our blessed Archdeacon Alan Wolstencroft saying 'Flipping 'eck Anne, you could keep coy carp in here'.

We worshipped in the chapel, we worshipped in the kitchen and meeting room, we worshipped wherever there was a dry corner. But that experience transformed us and I wouldn't have missed it for the world. We even had a wedding and a funeral in the chapel (but not at the same time) The funeral of the wonderful Edie Murray – a dear friend and one of our home communicants. She was very forward thinking, and I remember visiting her in hospital, and she introduced me to her nephew with the words "This is our vicar Anne – she wears denim you know!" It was people like Edie Murray and many others, too countless to mention, who because of their love and friendship transformed my life and I left a different person to the one who arrived here 12 years earlier. I didn't always recognize that, but I'm now convinced it was true. Transformation is about being changed, it's about moving on – painful and scary as that can be at times.

In our OT reading this morning we find Elisha not wanting Elijah to leave him. We find various groups of prophets trying to prepare him for that moment, but he, in effect says, Yes I know, shut up – or keep silent as our/one translation puts it. He didn't want to talk about it. But Elisha was transformed by his parting from Elijah.

In our gospel reading we find Peter, James and John on the mount of transfiguration wanting Jesus to be with them for ever. But transformation although it can be a mountaintop experience, can, nevertheless be painful. It's no coincidence that life's more challenging experiences transform us. And they can leave us speechless. As well as the 'keep silent' in our OT reading there's a 'listen to him' in the gospel. Hints about our need to be still before the presence of God and dare to be transformed.

William Temple once said "When I pray co-incidences happen, when I don't, they don't". And surely prayer is as much about silence as it is about words. It's about making space to listen to God – giving God the chance to sneak up on us and surprise us.

I read a book a few years ago by a chap called Carlo Carretto who spent much of his life as a Roman Catholic activist and whose life was very, very busy with the things of God. However he felt a call by God to spend time in the desert and the book is called "Letters from the Desert" - and it's based on letters he wrote from his time in the Sahara - letters to friends trying to explain his experience of God in that place. In a chapter entitled "Contemplative Prayer" he has this to say: *"Of the person coming down from the mountain after having spoken at length with God, you ask" "Talk to us about Him" - and that person will repeat with Angela of Foligno, one of the great Italian mystics, who said "When I again returned to myself, I knew for certain that those who feel God most deeply can say least about him. Precisely because they feel something of that infinite and unspeakable goodness, they can say less about it."*

That moment of glory on the mountain was short lived, because even as Peter was saying how good it was a cloud overshadowed them and a voice said "This is my son, my chosen. Listen to him." We don't know whether the voice dispelled the fear, or whether it increased the fear. But we do know that after this experience, none of the three disciples told anyone what they'd seen.

Sometimes our experiences of God can be such that words cannot express them. I'm sure there were many things Jesus didn't speak about with his disciples, and when he went up the mountain that day he took those and many other conflicts with him so that they could be transfigured - and when Jesus came down from the mountain he came down to the greatest conflict of all - the conflict of the cross.

The cloud that descended upon the disciples and on Jesus never really lifted, for after this event it was downhill all the way to Jerusalem and the cross. But it was in the cloud that the disciples discovered God. It was while they were covered in cloud, disorientated, confused, afraid, that God spoke to them and told them to trust.

In our own lives - it can be the times when we are confused and afraid that we discover more of God. There are plenty of "mountain top" stories in the bible - but the majority of Jesus' work took place in the valley - in everyday places with everyday people - people who were feeling at a low ebb, people for whom life had dealt a bitter blow. But in our own lives too there are mountain-top experiences - times of transformation, times of glory - and like Peter we can want those moments to last forever.

The love and the glory of God isn't a lottery - it isn't dependent on our numbers coming up. The love and the glory of God are there all the time. But the nature of our lives means that sometimes circumstances hide that glory from us, our lives are full of ups and downs - we have life-giving experiences and painful experiences - but in all that the glory of God is waiting to shine through.

I was revisiting Stephen Spencer's book on William Temple this week and I came across a section where, as Bishop of Manchester, he was involved in the Blackpool missions – started by Bishop Knox who believed the Church should follow the people and who, on this principle, took a band of clergy missionaries every year in the August Bank Holiday week to the town. In 1925 William wrote this to his wife Frances:

It has been a delicious day from morning to night. I had an easy time, as I was only speaking twice this morning (Central Pier and the Tower) and had no fixtures after lunch. I took a small and most delightful Confirmation at St. Stephen's – of 5 dancing girls at the Winter Gardens, who are shortly going to New York. Then I preached at St. John's.

So just another day in the life of William Temple doing just what Bishop's do, but obviously delighting in it and glimpsing the glory of God – even at Blackpool!

God wants you and me to do the same the glimpse the glory as we go around our daily business. And not only to glimpse it but to bring it to those places and those lives where all seems dark and despairing. God comes to the church in word and sacrament so that we can behold his glory - but God comes to his church in the lives of the poor, the powerless, the voiceless, the choiceless. God comes in places where we can glimpse him, not in glory, but in brokenness, but places where the power and the glory of God's transfiguring love is, nonetheless, very real.

So today as we think about the experience of transfiguration, let's pray that God's glory will be a reality in our lives – transforming us to serve God better, and bringing peace, no matter what. Amen.