

**Transfiguration Sunday: Bright Cloud**

*Exodus 24:12-18; Matthew 17:1-9*

The tragic suicide of TV personality Caroline Flack has played a large part in the news of last week. Whatever the rights and wrongs of her life, there can be little denying that the aggressive intrusion of some parts of the print media, and social media, into her life played a significant part in her death. She felt that at one point, in a period of 24 hours, her whole life and future were swept away, and last Saturday, she tragically ended her life.

Speaking about this on Radio 4's Thought for the Day last Wednesday, Lucy Winkett, Rector of St James' Piccadilly, said about this tragedy that with suicide and the influence of media:

*"...complex and variant influences are at work here and time is needed to consider them. Suicide happens to others less famous. Social media is often such a powerful source for good in society. It can relieve the isolation people feel. Huge sums are raised for charity, jobs are found, and disasters averted. Social media amplifies our human instincts to connect, to help, to give, to co-operate. It can equally amplify human instincts to attack and compete. We somehow are driven towards wanting to idolise and destroy each other and online but these choices are weaponised... The cruellest aspects of the culture we are creating online are fuelled by the wrecking balls of jealousy and fear and rage and contempt. All these feelings are recognisable to any grown up human being. But when distanced from the face-to-face relationships with which we feelings might be tempered, this sense of unaccountability can turn us into not 'trolls'...but something like monsters...Words matter, actions matter more. We need to change our behaviour. In December last year Caroline Flack shared a slogan that was a heartfelt plea. She posted, 'In a world where you can be anything, be kind.'"*

In our world today it is as if a cloud hangs over so much of life. Many people have been affected by the suicide of Caroline Flack. Untimely death does that. But hers is not the only cloud that has hung over the world. The relentless rain that has caused so much destruction in the Scottish Borders, in Wales, in Yorkshire and in the south-west of England has been another cloud. An English-born white woman from West London, converting to radical Islam and becoming a member of the banned Islamic State terror group, plotted to set off a bomb in St Paul's Cathedral. "I want to kill a lot," she told the (undercover) officer. "I would like to do church...a day like Christmas or Easter good, kill more." Another cloud.

The world can be a dark place. Clouds in the news. Clouds in our personal lives when things go wrong. When health breaks down. When relationships break up. When money is tight. When jobs weigh down. When exam results disappoint.

It is why, I believe, the world needs transfiguration. It is why, I believe, the world still needs Jesus. The clouds are there: real clouds, real trouble, real fear, real disappointment, real confusion, real doubt. But in the cloud, there is Jesus. I believe that at that time even the dark cloud becomes bright. Even if only for a moment. Jesus, in the bright cloud. Hard to make out, but there.

“Peter, James and John accompany Jesus up the mountain after hearing the news of Jerusalem and Jesus’ imminent death. It is only human that in their minds they play out the next few days and weeks. They begin to look for alternatives, desperate for a second opinion, a way to stop time. They want to build a safe sanctuary away from the world, to be content in the moment, saving Jesus and themselves from the heartache to come. They cannot; nor can we.

We glimpse that moment in a hospital room as we sit with two people who have just heard the worst news of their lives and watch the patient reach out to assure the companion, the healthy one, that all will be well. We glimpse that moment when the evening news reflects nothing but chaos, and then there is one story of a person’s graceful act of healing a broken world by caring for another person the world would rather forget. These are the moments when people begin to understand that where there is suffering, there is Holy Ground. These are the moments when we realise God is present in the suffering and sacrifice, just as God is present in the promise and potential of our lives.”<sup>i</sup>

The moment of transfiguration, the bright cloud, is such a moment. The cloud is real, the vision is obscured, life is overshadowed. But in the midst, even in the cloud, there is the hint of brightness. When you don’t know how you are going to do life; when you don’t know what tomorrow is going to bring; when the pain in your life, physical, emotional, spiritual, is real; when faith seems like an implausible answer to the hard facts that weigh you down; in the midst, even in the cloud, there is the hint of brightness.

God prepares God's people in the transcendent encounters of their lives to endure the world below. The world of the cross, the world that has the ability to break us and yet is never beyond God's redemption and light.

Now, for some people, this is a consoling message. It is a word of encouragement, because they see the light, and the hope it speaks of. For others, all they see is the cloud. They feel no presence. They hear no voice. For yet others, maybe most of us, we see the bright cloud. Like the disciples who witnessed this event and talked, a little, about it afterwards, we see the bright cloud. We see the light, but it's veiled. I wonder if this is something that the Apostle Paul was hinting at when he talked about seeing love was like looking through a glass, darkly? I wonder if that is what the Moses story we read from Exodus was hinting at that the Israelites wanted the reassurance of God, a God they barely knew, but could not bear to be too close to this bright, fiery divinity. The clouds are there, but maybe, just maybe, the people of faith might see the glimmer of light. The cloud might yet be bright, even if the darkness around it is great.

For some, that's maybe not much comfort. For some, if God really is God, surely God would step out of the cloud and make it all plain and clear, and even though life might be tough, hard, unpleasant, painful, this God of light would be right there.

But it's not always like that. Some might even argue it is hardly ever like that. It's not to say it's never like that, but so often the truth of living is that we live in the cloud, and at its best, it is only a bright cloud.

Yet in the mist of the relentless routines of life, 'sometimes a light surprises'<sup>ii</sup>, we find ourselves startled by the stories of our transforming God; an elusive glory that cannot be programmed or administered, only received with awe and wonder. At such times we may catch glimpses of a glory that can break out when we least expect it, with power to transfigure, to transform, the ordinary into something that speaks, from the bright cloud, of God being with us.

We know we can't stay on the mountaintop in the bright cloud. The air is too thin. We are called back down to where the world and life awaits us, in all its tarnished beauty, and raw ugliness, and enticing possibility. But when we come back down the mountain, perhaps little wisps of the bright

cloud cling to us, and help us cope with the 'near the ground' stuff of life we have to deal with. That helps me. It might not seem much, but it is something. Life never runs on tramlines, it is never that predictable or organised, as much as we would like it to be. But it's still life, and it is for the living. You never know what to expect. You can never be sure what God may be up to and what God might call you to do.

Martin Luther King Jr must have been afraid many times in the struggle to bring an end to racial injustice. Attack dogs, fire hoses, thrown rocks, and angry crowds were dangerous and frightening. One moment late at night, when King was sitting alone at the kitchen table, he heard what he called an 'inner voice' telling him to do what he thought was right. From that point on, he knew that the hand of God was upon him, and it gave him the courage to face what was ahead. God was moving through him to set his people free.<sup>iii</sup> King had his doubts; King had his own personal demons; but there was enough light in the bright cloud to move him onwards, even to his fateful end. He got to the mountaintop, even though he did not enter the promised land.

It is heart-breaking when people find their lives so heavily clouded by darkness that they cannot see light, any light. I do not know why some see and some do not, why some respond, and some do not. But I do know that some people do see the light, even if it is only the bright cloud. It changes the way they see the world and themselves, like Martin Luther King Jr. Business as usual is no longer possible after you have seen the light.

Transfiguration light signals that a new day is on the way. God is about the business of bringing hope and healing to a broken world. When your eyes are opened to God's good future, then you cannot go back. See the bright cloud, and maybe this: in a world where you can be anything, be kind.

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**

**Amen**

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<sup>i</sup> Robert Runcie, 'Zeebrugge Ferry Disaster Sermon', in *Tongues of Angels, Tongues of Men*, p740

<sup>ii</sup> William Cowper hymn, 1779

<sup>iii</sup> Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years*, p162