

# Weighed Down With Sleep

a sermon preached on the  
**Last Sunday before Lent**

Sunday 14 February 2010  
at

**St Luke's in the City, Christchurch**

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Lection: Exodus 34:29-35, 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2, Luke 9:28-43

Today's gospel story is always given to us on the last Sunday before Lent – Matthean, Markan, and Lucan versions on a repeating three-year cyclic pattern. Luke's version of the events on the mountain uniquely includes this curious detail: "Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep, but since they had stayed awake, they saw [Jesus'] glory and [Moses and Elijah] with him."<sup>1</sup> Apparently neither Matthew nor Mark know anything about Peter and his companions being weighed down with sleep. And it's a strange allegation, for sure – the ascent of mountains is well known for enlivening, for waking up, for heightened states of consciousness. Why are Peter and his companions weighed down with sleep, in precisely the location where a heightened state of consciousness might be expected?

On this last Sunday before Lent the gospel is always focussing our attention on the task of consciousness – for that is the tremendous task that lies ahead of us, as today's final liturgical actions remind us. The veil which guards the children of Israel from the full force of the glory of YHWH on Mount Sinai symbolises the potentially destructive power of the numinous to those who are insufficiently awake – that is, those who are in a primitive state of consciousness. Aaron and all the Israelites were rightly afraid to come near this man whose face was shining.<sup>2</sup> I suppose it's not surprising that, somewhat later in the development of Israel, that St Paul should describe the Israelites as those with a "veil over their minds".<sup>3</sup> The tragedy is that for most of the Christian era Christians have misused this text in the service of blind prejudice against God's first people – the Nazi plan to exterminate the Jews could not have got off the ground but for the many centuries of evil Christian prejudice fuelled by Scriptural abuse. Nevertheless, in spite of this worst aspect of our religion, St Paul has named a profound psychological truth – the task of consciousness requires the lifting of the many veils which lie over the human mind.

On the mountainside with Jesus, it is the veiled minds of Peter and his companions which potentially thwarts their coming to the new consciousness represented by the Transfiguration. In the verses immediately preceding today's story the evangelist recounts Jesus' central teaching, the teaching upon which the entire gospel hangs: "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it."<sup>4</sup> It is routinely argued that the so-called 'golden rule' is the central plank of Christian faith – "Do to others as you would have them do to you."<sup>5</sup> But the fact is that this teaching can be found in all the world religions, in one form or another. Indeed, even those who hold to no religion at all are capable of living according to the golden rule. No, as important as the rule of love is, it is not the central plank of Christian faith. For one thing, it is too obvious, too commonsensical, too close to mere self-interest and the potential for the reward of reciprocity. Jesus' teaching about losing life, on the other hand, is utterly counter-cultural, nonsensical, absurd – and that is precisely what makes the Christian gospel so astonishingly revolutionary.

So, having just taught his disciples the essential, counter-cultural and revolutionary inner secret of the kingdom, he takes them up a mountain – the traditional location for enlightenment, for expanded

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 9:32

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 34:30

<sup>3</sup> 2 Corinthians 3:14-15

<sup>4</sup> Luke 8:24

<sup>5</sup> Luke 6:31, Matthew 7:12

consciousness, as all the great religious teachers have ever known. And that which threatens the disciples' enlightenment is the same threat faced by all of us – slumber. Just as, near the end, in the Garden of Gethsemane, it is slumber which prevents them from remaining alert to the great prayer of Jesus: “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.”<sup>6</sup> That is the breakthrough to true prayer, unlike our many prayers that we may get what we want. But they miss the true prayer because of slumber. On the mountain they almost miss the moment of enlightenment for being weighed down with sleep.

Perhaps the miracle on the mountain, in the unique insight of Luke, is that in spite of this potential thwarting, nevertheless: “since they had stayed awake, they saw [Jesus’] glory.” True, they cannot face the fullness of enlightenment in one instant, as no human can, and within moments of the vision Peter is babbling on about constructing shrines, concretising the revelation – which is always sure and certain death to enlightenment. Even so, Luke’s story does give us cause for hope since, in spite of their being weighed down with sleep they did remain awake. Coming to consciousness, enlightenment, spiritual growth, salvation, evolution – and there is a measure of interchangeability between these terms which arise from a variety of insights – coming to consciousness requires the effort to wake up, to resist the inertia of slumber. Seeing the glory of God, and the glory of God-incarnate in human flesh, requires rather more than the golden rule – only by the strong medicine of the nonsensical, counter-cultural central teaching of Jesus and his true prayer can we resist the slumber of anxiety.

That is the human task, the task before all of us. The gospel reveals to us the path to freedom, the path to enlightenment, and to be able to receive it we must overcome the temptation to slumber in all its forms. Slumber is a great modern addiction. Hypnotised by the glittering appearances embalming the consumer marketplace, and their extravagant sham promises, we are constantly in danger of slumber – ‘Sky’ and digital TV and ‘iPod’ and internet entertainment unto death, nationalistic fervour, over-consumption, alcohol, drugs, gambling, and superficiality and escapism and mass-mindedness of every kind weigh down our consciousness with sleep. So too does the excessive rationality which so dominates our culture, asphyxiating our souls into slumber.

The word in the Greek text which describes the disciples’ state is *υπνω* *hypnō* – immediately recognisable in English. So on this last Sunday before Lent the gospel prepares us for the task ahead. Let us determine to resist the temptation of the hypnosis to which each of us is particularly prone, to remain awake. For the Jesus who invites us up the mountain reassures us that we are made for transformation, for enlightenment, for higher consciousness, for freedom. “And all of us,” St Paul grasped, “with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of [Christ] as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image [of Christ] from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Luke 22:42

<sup>7</sup> 2 Corinthians 3:17-18