

# Sermon

## Union Chapel

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**Readings** 2 Kings 2:1–12  
Mark 9:2–9

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If our gospel is veiled at all, it is veiled only for those on the way to destruction; their unbelieving minds are so blinded by the the god of this passing age that the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, cannot dawn upon them and bring them light.

It is not ourselves that we proclaim; we proclaim Christ Jesus as lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.

For the God who said “Out of darkness light shall shine” has caused his light to shine in our hearts, the light which is knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

### **2 Corinthians 4:3–6**

There are many sorts of secrets: there are things that we do not actually tell someone but which they guess nevertheless, things that we are not supposed to tell but, in a moment of weakness, let slip, there are things which everyone knows but nobody wants said (as in the wonderful reading about Elijah, when everyone seems to know that Elijah is about to depart, but Elishah rather irritably tells them to shut up). Secrets, of course, are usually things that people want to say, or want to know: there's no point in the game otherwise.

So: Mark's gospel. The reading that we have heard occurs at a turning point in the gospel: before this, Jesus had been in Galilee, healing and teaching. And then comes the point at which, after some prodding, Peter says “you are the Christ, the son of the living God”: and after that, there is the transfiguration – the passage that we have just heard – and after *that*, Jesus goes to Jerusalem, to confront the religious centre of Israel, goes to his death and, ultimately, to his resurrection. So this passage is right at the centre of the whole story, and it is a sort of answer: Peter had, somehow or other, guessed who Jesus really was, and here he gets shown that his guess was correct. He is shown something, something no doubt difficult to put into words, but something which showed Jesus reflecting, showing forth, the glory of God. Jesus had, of course, been showing forth God's glory before, but in a way which was not immediately obvious: easy to think that he was merely a wonder-worker, or someone with a loose attitude to the law, or someone arrogant enough to forgive sins when we

all know that only God can forgive sins, or a crank with disciples. But this time, what Peter sees shows forth the glory of God unmistakably and unequivocally: not easy to mistake this.

But, still, it doesn't become public yet: Jesus tells the disciples that they're not to tell anyone, nobody at all, until events in Jerusalem were over. So, we have a secret. And it's not just an isolated thing, this secret: we hear a similar command over and over again in Mark's gospel. Jesus is constantly forbidding the disciples to tell the world what they have heard or seen, but it constantly keeps leaking out anyway: there are always grateful people who had been cured, or impressed bystanders, who spread the word.

So, one sort of secret: the thing we don't talk about but which becomes public nevertheless. Another sort of secret: the thing that we don't say explicitly, but which we nevertheless reveal by our choice of words, or our phraseology, or something of the sort. So it is in this reading from Paul, when he says "If our gospel is veiled at all . . .": eh? Where did this come from? Has Paul previously been talking about his gospel being veiled? Well, no (and, in fact, this is the only place in his letters where Paul uses this word). So: maybe he's replying to something that *someone else* has said? Maybe people around him have been saying that his theology – his writings, or his preaching – is hard to understand? (This is, let me say, a consoling thought for those of us who have struggled to find out the meaning of Paul's letters: they seem to have had that problem in the early church too.) And, speculation apart, we do get the impression that Paul's not entirely sure of his audience here.

Communication is a difficult thing. We face, as Christians, a problem of communication: we face it almost by definition, since what we have, the gospel, is called, in the New Testament, the "good news". And so we face the usual problems that people face when they are trying to get over news to people: is this true? Is it relevant for *me*? Is it *good* news? Why should *I* be bothered?

But many people face very similar problems in a rather more prosaic context. I do, for one: my job is described as "lecturer", and I lecture. And I suppose many of these problems face me, too: that I've got to convince my students that I'm telling them the truth, but also I've got to get them motivated: that is, I have to convince them that programming computers is fun. Which it is. In other words, I have to get over good news to them. And the same probably holds true for many of us, all of us whose lives somehow involve communication. It certainly holds true even more for something I would not dare to speak about, namely the problems of communication between parents and children.

Now normally, when problems of communication arise, there is a simple response: try harder. Particularly in my case, since it's my job, I can't really end up saying that it's all the fault of the students that they don't understand me: I simply have to keep on trying. In a lot of cases, this is true for us, as a church, too: we simply have to keep trying to explain what we are, and what we have to say. For example, when we had a lot of attention from journalists over the past year, it was remarkable to hear the misconceptions that journalists had about what the church was, to hear that they knew almost nothing about congregationalism, and so on. But these sorts of things can be countered: we can keep explaining ourselves, and, sooner or later, something will sink in.

However, there are also deeper issues at work. Paul, when he's responding to this challenge about his gospel being "veiled", mounts a spirited theological defence of his position: this defence may seem like a rant, but it's worth looking

at. He says of his audience (and I would not recommend this as a communication strategy) that “their unbelieving minds are so blinded by the god of this passing age that the Gospel [...] cannot dawn upon them”. Well, “this passing age”: we see plenty of that. Celebrity culture, for one. Journalists talking in clichés, for another. A steadily increasing public selfishness, for a third. And don’t let me get started on politicians. These are all things which lead to a certain darkening of minds: things which get people obsessed with the goods of “this passing age”, and in so doing shut off the possibility of looking for something else, something which is not concerned with the glitz of this present moment. And, if we think about it from the point of view of communication, this darkening of the mind is quite depressing: it means that there are great and large forces (whether we call them the “god of this passing age”, or whether we give them the names of prominent media tycoons) which are prejudiced against our good news.

Now in Paul’s language, this darkening of the mind is called “unbelief”: and unbelief means, not so much that you don’t assent to a creed or something like that, but that you are not receptive to the good news. And the good news is what Jesus came to give: to say that the kingdom of God is among us, that it is possible for us to live a life which is free and which is glorious and which is close to God. And that, though there may not be spectacular things happening to many of us – we may not have these mountaintop experiences – we can still talk, as Paul talked, of “the light which is knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ”, the light which shines into our hearts.

We have been talking of secrets. Here is another sort of secret: God’s secret. This secret is the light of God, shining in our hearts: the light which shows us how it is possible to live a life which is free and glorious and close to God, as Jesus’ life was free, glorious, close to God. Now the mysterious, the truly secret part of this is that all of Jesus’ life was glorious like this. We may concentrate on the mountaintop experiences, when we see Jesus’ face shining, but the true mystery is that, from beginning to end, Jesus was one with God. Consequently, his life in Galilee, his everyday humanity, was just as glorious (because just as close to God) as when his face shone, when he was talking to Moses and Elijah. This is not easy for such as us to understand, we whose minds are darkened and who still have a hankering after glitz (just as the disciples did, and who wanted to prolong the moment on the mountaintop).

This is all, of course, high theology, and not to be deployed merely because we are faced with the normal sort of communication difficulties that everyone faces. However, there are times when the normal communication difficulties seem to become superhuman: that we are facing a torrent of misconception. And, if this should induce us to despair, then we should always remember these words of Paul, which are – however grumpy they may seem – genuinely good news: they tell us of God’s light shining in our hearts, of the light which can illuminate the recesses of even such darkened minds as ours.