

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 14th February 2021
Sunday next before Lent

Collect

Holy God,
you know the disorder of our sinful lives:
set straight our crooked hearts,
and bend our wills to love your goodness
and your glory
in Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

2 Corinthians 4:3-6

Even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness', who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Mark 9:2-9

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!' Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

Sermon

A few weeks ago, when I came out of the church after the 9.30 service on Sunday morning, I had one of those moments when I just wanted to freeze time. It was snowing quite hard, and there was something about the large, falling flakes of snow that was really quite magical. It often seems very peaceful when snow is falling, and there is something mesmerising about the steady fall, especially as it settles. As I stood there on my own in the snow, I found myself transported back to happy childhood days in Scotland, where we had heavy snowfall every year. Somehow I could also feel myself connecting with those emotions that are aroused when watching Christmas movies that always involve a white Christmas and “happily ever after.” There was part of me that really did want to stay in that moment forever.

I wonder if Peter had a similar sense of wanting to stay in a moment forever when he suggested to Jesus on the top of that mountain that they should build three dwellings for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. I wonder if he felt that, by creating permanent places for the three of them to stay, he could somehow hold on to the sense of God’s presence that he was feeling in that moment.

I’m not sure that the experience on that mountain top would have been equivalent to my emotional experience as the snow fell, but clearly it had an extraordinary impact. Perhaps Peter, James and John were already filled with some anticipation. After all, when the three of them were singled out, it was often at significant moments. And going up a mountain may well have been evocative for them. Jesus liked to go up mountains to escape the crowds and pray; and the scriptures reminded them of Moses also finding God up a mountain.

And yet what they experienced must surely have taken their breath away. Jesus transfigured, and an awareness of the presence of Elijah and Moses. Just think for a moment about where we are in Mark’s story of Jesus. If you remember, Mark’s gospel is often seen as being divided into two parts: the first eight chapters introduce us to Jesus – he preaches, teaches and performs miracles; then there is the “hinge” point in chapter eight, after which Jesus appears to be on an inexorable journey towards Jerusalem – there are almost no miracles, and opposition grows. Today’s story, the transfiguration, appears early in the second half of the gospel.

If Peter wanted to freeze that moment in time, he may have had good reason. Not only might he have wanted to hold on to a deeper sense of closeness to God, of experiencing the mystery of God. He may also have been thinking about the growing threat to Jesus. Better, surely, to preserve his safety by building him a dwelling with Elijah and Moses, here on the mountaintop.

Yet I wonder whether for Jesus the experience had a different significance, committing him more strongly than ever to that journey to Jerusalem, which was to be his vocation. Those words from God – ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!’ – remind us of Jesus’s baptism. We don’t know whether Peter, James and John were present at that event, but the connection will not have been lost on Jesus. There is a subtle difference in God’s words, though. At his baptism, the words were addressed to Jesus himself – “you are my Son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased.” Now God is addressing the disciples. And in doing so, he is giving Jesus a specific role in relation to them.

Many years ago I was a Brownie leader, and I would also help my friend with her Guide camps. Whereas when I was a child, Guide camp seemed to involve tidying tents ready for inspection, I discovered that nowadays it’s all about climbing, abseiling and countless other activities. I don’t have a great head for heights, yet, despite my inner fear, I completed both the abseiling and the climbing. It can be easy for fear to spread, and I was very aware that if the leader started to get anxious,

others might, too. So I just went for it, telling myself that the responsibility I had towards the guides was more important than my own fear.

I wonder whether there was anything equivalent going on for Jesus when his father spoke those words to the disciples on the top of that mountain. Jesus was probably already becoming aware that he was unsettling those in authority. There was risk involved in what he was doing. Who could have blamed him for toning down the message; settling for warm conversations with those who were already becoming interested in what he had to say.

And yet that would have been to deny his vocation. To turn away from his calling. God knew that – and so did Jesus. By reminding him of his responsibility towards his disciples, the voice of God perhaps set the knowledge of the pain Jesus would face into a different context. Or at least the sense of responsibility took precedence over the fear. Because in God's words, Jesus will not only have been aware of his present role in relation to the disciples, but he will also have been conscious that in the subsequent weeks to be spent with him, they would be formed into those who would lead the church when he was no longer with them.

As we approach Lent, the story of the transfiguration is such a helpful one to reflect on. It tells us so much about vocation – about Jesus's own recognition of all he was called to, as well as the growing awareness of the disciples. There is something about that image of transfiguration – of closeness to the presence of God – that might help us during the Lenten season.

In coming close to God, we allow a light to be shone on us – and that can be uncomfortable. For most of us there are aspects of who we are that we aren't necessarily proud of. Just because we might know that these things are known to God, doesn't make it easy to discuss them with God. Yet Lent is a time when this kind of growth in self awareness can be so helpful.

And that is because – and on St. Valentine's Day it might be easier for us to remember – the light of God is the light of love. God knows us already and loves us. And the light is shone not only on the things we aren't proud of, but also on all that is beautiful about each of us and gives glory to God. And then in the radiance of that light, we might find ourselves better able to find and live out all that we are called to.

Amen