

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 27th February 2022
The 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.

Exodus 34:29-end

Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him. But Moses called to them; and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them. Afterwards all the Israelites came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the Lord had spoken with him on Mount Sinai. When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face; but whenever Moses went in before the Lord to speak with him, he would take the veil off, until he came out; and when he came out, and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, the Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining; and Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with him.

Luke 9:28-43a

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, 'Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah'—not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, 'This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!' When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. Just then a man from the crowd shouted, 'Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It throws him into convulsions until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not.' Jesus answered, 'You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here.' While he was coming, the demon dashed him to the

ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. And all were astounded at the greatness of God.

Sermon

I am not a rock climber – I don't really have a head for heights. Whenever I am walking in the Dales or the Lake District and see rock climbers, it slightly terrifies me, yet it can be a beautiful thing to watch someone move effortlessly over a rock face, and I imagine that the views are sublime.

Those who know will tell you that one of the rules of rock climbing – and in fact this applies to other forms of climbing, including going up a ladder – is that you need to maintain three points of contact. It is only if two feet and one hand or two hands and one foot are secure that you can move safely.

I wonder whether we might need the equivalent to the three points of contact in our faith. Those things which keep us secure enough to be able to progress. And I wonder what those things might be.

Let me try to explain what I mean. As you may know, some of the congregation have been meeting for the last four weeks to study the Living in Love and Faith course. Living in Love and Faith is a teaching document that has been produced by the Church of England to help us to have conversations about identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage. These are issues over which there is significant division in the church, and the hope is that by making use of the teaching materials, progress will be made.

It was as we were discussing the diversity of opinion in the Church of England on this issue at Morning Prayer that someone said, "Wouldn't it be helpful to know what Jesus would say on the issue if he were here today."

In truth, this is the question that, as Christians, we are probably always asking, in some form or another. And one of the reasons for the current Living in Love and Faith teaching materials is to prevent people of differing opinions from shouting ever more loudly at one another that the view that they are expressing is clearly what Jesus would say if he were here today – backed up, no doubt, with a relevant quotation from scripture.

It can be tempting to assume that we would be in a better position if we lived two thousand years ago, when Jesus was actually around to ask. And yet I wonder whether that is really the case. While the purpose of the gospel writers is to show us categorically that Jesus is the Messiah, and they all provide evidence to support that, even they do not shy away from the fact that even during Jesus's lifetime, his identity was far from obvious to everyone – or probably to most people.

This morning's gospel reading – and its context – helps us to see some of the challenges. And perhaps also some of the possible solutions.

The story of Jesus being transfigured is perhaps one of the most iconic. It is evidence par excellence of his divinity. And each of the gospel writers demonstrates its significance. Jesus goes up a mountain to pray. We know that mountains were typically considered to be places of closeness with God. Moses met God in the burning bush on Mount Horeb, and the ten commandments were revealed to him by God on Mount Sinai. Luke also tells us that Jesus took Peter, James and John with him. These were Jesus's closest disciples – the inner circle, who were present for the most important moments of revelation. At the moment of transfiguration, Moses and Elijah appear, connecting Jesus with these prophets and all that has been revealed in the scriptures.

If this was all the evidence we had, it would be hard to imagine that anyone would doubt Jesus's identity. That anyone would do anything other than follow him, since his divinity is hardly in question.

And yet that isn't the full story. Just prior to the transfiguration, Jesus has spent time revealing the harsh truth about his death and resurrection. He has explained: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves?" If ever we are tempted to put on rose tinted glasses and assume that it was easy to choose to follow Jesus when he was alive, this should surely remind us that it wasn't. In many ways the challenges for those first followers were exactly the same as they are for us. Can it really be true that we are being asked to see the world in an entirely different way? Can it really be true that we are being asked to overturn the expectations that we have been brought up with in favour of a radical new message? A message that places the poor and marginalised first. A message that asks us to love without condition; to forgive without end.

It seems, then, that it has never been easy to be a follower of Jesus. In our own time we are faced with the constant challenge of discerning God's voice amid the many others vying for our attention. And perhaps that isn't so very different from those first disciples, no doubt asking themselves whether it could really be true that the Messiah would have to face death at human hands.

And so I wonder what might help us in this plight. What are our equivalents of the "three points of contact" that climbers require, that will hold us sufficiently firm in our faith that we can grow and develop, even while there are times of doubt and uncertainty.

It strikes me that the story of the transfiguration suggests some of those things that might help. First, we may have had moments of insight, spiritual experiences that we constantly return to. Our own equivalents of seeing Jesus transfigured before us – perhaps a little less dramatic, though perhaps not. Our faith experiences can help to hold us firm; they are a particular way that we have come to know God. Second, the presence of Peter, James and John reminds us of the importance of our fellow travellers. There will be people who have supported you throughout your life on your faith journey. Here at St. Mary's, it is the community of people who make up the church, not the building, however much it can help. And finally the appearance of Elijah and Moses suggests that our third point of contact is our connection with the scriptures, and the ways that these are interpreted and re-interpreted from generation to generation. While reading the Bible can be perplexing, it can also be revelatory. It is a way in which God continues to speak to us, if only we will listen.

Following Jesus will never bring with it the guarantee of an easy life. And yet it really is life itself. Perhaps the transfiguration can help remind us of those things which hold us firm as we seek to hold firm to God's love and share it with others in a complex and fast-moving world.

Amen.