

The Sunday next before Lent, 11 February 2024, Year B:

I Kings 19.1-6 and 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 anymore, but only Jesus.

On this last Sunday before our keeping of Lent we hear again one of the Transfiguration accounts from the gospels; each serves as a turning point as Jesus turns his face towards Jerusalem. The Jerusalem that "kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!" (Matt. 23.37) Jesus in turning his face towards Jerusalem is always turning to all that will befall him. He will act and he will be acted on. He will be vilified. He will be glorified. All of this is yet to unfold. We who are gathered here and in congregations great and small across the world will go with him as one body in Christ to Jerusalem by way of our observance of Lent, Holy Week and Easter.

For our church at least, the Church of England, this Sunday intentionally always recalls Jesus' Transfiguration on the Mount ushering in the season of Lent with its call to fasting and prayer, self-examination and repentance. Lent is a time to look at ourselves in the mirror, to examine our hearts and minds with courageous honesty, to confess sin and to banish all that is not worthy of our calling as disciples of Christ. Lent is an old English word for spring. I shall put it simply. It is time for a spring clean "to lay aside the sin that clings so closely". (Hebrews 12:1b). The Church calls us to be serious about who we are in the presence of God as Christians. In words taken from the Letter to the Church in Ephesus that great ancient city on the eastern coast of the Aegean Sea, "I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which

you have been called,... “ (Ephesians 4:1) We hear in Paul’s use of the verb BEG his desperate plea that those who follow Christ “be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.” (Romans 12.2) The notions of self-restraint, abstinence and denying ourselves have little currency in our materialistic and atomised world, while the saints of old look evermore like figures from a fantasy world, although at one time they were much celebrated for their devotion. In the words of Paul we have again been blinded by the gods of this age.

The Transfiguration ushers in our keeping of Lent reminding us that the Jesus of history is the Lord of all time and is as we heard a few weeks ago as relevant today as we hear people the world over asking the same question, “What have you to do with us Lord Jesus?” In words familiar to you from Robert’s preaching let us have a closer look!

This year the first thing I light upon and will elaborate is the company of persons. They are in chronological order. Jesus, “Peter and James and John”, as well as Elijah and Moses. To my mind it is important to see all of these persons not in isolation from one another or in separate groups, but rather in relationship to each another by linking them to one another. How are they related? They are related by all being human, obvious, but important. Although there is another dimension to Jesus. God meets us in our humanity. These persons are related to each by all being led by God. All have ascended a mountain and Jesus will ascend a cross for their sake. All will make known God’s will by being agents of God’s will.

The interconnectedness of the relationships on which this episode hinges is dependent on Jesus. Their relationship to each other unmistakably revolves around Jesus. He is the axle around which all else turns. He is the centre. He is the sun. What has gone before and what comes after ‘the Jesus event’ is connected. Across time these persons belong together and so it is good to see them together in this cameo whereby their

unity is affirmed. Again this may seem obvious, but it hasn't always been the case. Down the centuries with fluctuations we as Christians have been more or less aware of our Jewish heritage with consequences for Jews, and Christian knowing and believing as well as the mission of the Church.

I remember well when I first came to Christ Church attending my first retreat, which then was held at Heiligenkreuz the Cistercian monastery outside of the city. There I walked along an elevated but straight path to a small chapel with figures from the Old and New Testaments lining the way on each side facing each other, and thinking how appropriate to visualise in this way their interconnectedness and by extension our being connected to them. In like vein I also appreciate, even enjoy the Thanksgiving for the Holy Ones of God which is recited during All Saints' tide (from Common Worship, Times and Season). The litany begins by reminding the worshipper of the Holy Ones of God old and new. I will share with you the first section, which is compulsory.

Let us give thanks to the Lord.

For Abraham and Sarah, our ancestors in faith,  
and all who journey into the unknown trusting God's promises:  
For Jacob, deceitful younger brother, yet chosen by God,  
the father of all who are called by virtue not of their own:  
For Moses the lawgiver and Aaron the priest,  
and all who lead God's people to freedom and newness of life: R

Let us give thanks to the Lord.

For Esther and Deborah, saviours of their nation,  
and for all who dare to act courageously at God's call:  
For Hannah and Ruth, and all who through love and devotion  
witness to the faithfulness of God:  
For Isaiah, John the Baptist and all the prophets,  
and all who speak the truth without counting the cost: R

Let us give thanks to the Lord.

For Mary the Virgin, the mother of our Lord and God,  
and all who obey God's call without question:

For Andrew and John and the first disciples,  
and for all who forsake everything to follow Jesus:  
For Mary Magdalene, Salome and Mary,  
first witnesses of the resurrection,  
and for all who bear witness to Christ: R

Let us give thanks to the Lord.  
For Peter and Paul [and James and John] and the apostles,  
who preached the gospel to Jew and Gentile,  
and for all who take the good news to the ends of the earth:  
For Barnabas, Silas and Timothy,  
and for all who bring encouragement and steadfastness:  
For the writers of the Gospels  
and for all who bring the faith of Christ alive for each generation: R

The litany of Thanksgiving for the Holy Ones of God continues by remembering Christians down the centuries.

Today there is one other aspect of Mark's account of the Transfiguration that I want to focus on. What we might overlook because we are dazzled by the transfigured one, "and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them". is Jesus' conversation with Elijah and Moses, specific persons. This conversation signifies that Jesus is the fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets. He is the Righteous One and he is the Promised One by prophet bards\* foretold as we sing each Christmas. (\*Carol: It Came Upon the Midnight Clear). The Transfiguration cameo will remind us that the two great commandments that form the basis for the Summary of the Law and the Prophets of loving God first and out of this love for God a love arises for your neighbour as for yourself. This love of God and neighbour is foundational for the Law and the Prophets and not least for ourselves. Loving our neighbour, loving ourselves as our neighbour, it all goes back to our first being loved by God.

At this stage of the unfolding revelation Peter and James and John show that they are not yet fully part of this conversation. They see, but they do not fully understand. This is made clear by Peter's reaction. As yet they and their companions do not and cannot

fully grasp what going to Jerusalem means, although they know that it is Jerusalem that “kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!” If there were time I should unpack what Jerusalem stands for. Jerusalem is to be a place of peace, but harbours within her walls and within her palaces much that will not make for peace; in the same way we harbour thoughts and attitudes that will not make for peace.

The six days that introduce today’s Transfiguration cameo is a significant bridge to what has gone before for it was six days earlier that Peter made his confession that Jesus is the Messiah at Caesarea Philippi only to be rebuked severely by Jesus for not accepting what he Jesus says about his impending death, his destiny. Peter is not listening. He is not listening, because he knows better. By recalling Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Messiah, we understand why this moment is significant then and for you and me now. You and I with Peter and James and John are to listen to Jesus. We do so through the Scriptures guided we hope and pray by the Holy Spirit and by the Faithful Ones of God. We do so with Jesus, listening to his teaching and studying his example, by walking the Way of the Cross with him that leads to the place of the Skull, Golgotha, Calvary, where through the supreme offering of God, clothed in our humanity he atones for our sin and vanquishes death so that we might sing, ‘I know that my Redeemer liveth!’ It is a messy, horrible and dark business. Jesus is held hostage. He is given vinegar to drink. He thirsts. He suffers. He breathes his last breath.

No wonder John Donne in his poem flees the place of sacrifice in his poem Good Friday, 1613. Riding Westward.

If on these things I durst not looke, durst I  
Upon his miserable mother cast mine eye,  
Who was Gods partner here, and furnish'd thus  
Halfe of that Sacrifice, which ransom'd us?  
We should all want to flee that moment of devastation although it be a life-giving moment. Life with all its beauty is also a dark place. My word count tells me it is time

to stop and so I shall... But I cannot stop without reminding us of the words we should take with us into our observance of Lent, as we walk through the door that is Ash Wednesday. Mysteriously a voice speaks out of a cloud addressing the disciples, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!' These words let each one of us write out and pin to our refrigerators for they are food. Let us write them out and place them in the go-to corners of our homes for reflection, stillness and prayer for they are the source of wisdom. Let us write them out and fix them to the inside of the front doors of our homes. May the last thing we read as we go about our daily business be, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!' Where shall we encounter God during the week, but in our everyday life. **Amen.**