

**Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> February 2022**  
**Sunday next before Lent (C)**

**Liverpool Parish Church**

**OT: Exodus 34.29-end**  
**NT: 2 Corinthians 3.12-4.2**  
**G: Luke 9.28-36**

It's only 30 years ago or so when our church began to commemorate the transfiguration of Jesus on this Sunday, just before Lent starts. There is a feast day of Transfiguration, as you know, on 6 August. And yet, here, just before Lent and Easter, we are celebrating the transfiguration story this morning. 'Surely a mistake', as the editors say. But, perhaps not quite so. If we think of it, when we celebrate the transfiguration before Lent, this allows us to frame the whole of Lent between two parallel, similar but different stories. At the beginning of Lent we have the transfiguration and at the end we have the story of Jesus going to pray alone in Gethsemane before his arrest. On the one hand, a story in which Jesus goes to a mountainous place to pray; he is followed by Peter James and John, his three closest friends. At the end of Lent, Jesus, goes to pray in solitude in Gethsemane and enters a mystery so great when the same three friends shrink from it and have no words. Are they the same story? In both, Jesus prays alone; in both he is with the same disciples; in both there is an Epiphany, and the three disciples react in terror. But one story speaks of glory and the other speaks of facing the darkness of death.

When we frame Lent between these two stories, we remember that our Christian life is always lived between those two poles: On the mountain of transfiguration, Peter, James and John, see the veil lifted, to use the imagery of St. Paul in our second reading today. They see that behind the human life of Jesus there is a blinding light, and an unbearable glory; his human nature is shot through with God's own freedom. The story is introduced with the apparently innocent words, 'after about eight days' in Luke's gospel, and in Matthew and

Mark, it's 'after six days'. From early times, commentators have said that this is an allusion to the days of creation: the transfiguration is the climax of the creative work of God, either the entrance into the joy and repose of the seventh day or the beginning of the new creation, the eighth day, depending on what kind of symbolism you want to use. In Jesus, the world of ordinary prosaic time is not destroyed; it is broken up and reconnected, even when at the heart of darkness. And so, at the end of Lent, the three disciples see that that glory and liberty is made real in accepting death; they come to realise that the power of God is revealed not in crushing and controlling, but in sacrifice and love.

Maybe we begin to understand how we live between those two stories. We cannot understand the glorious light of God unless we see how God's power is always focused on that sacrifice of love, which sets us free and gives us life. We can't understand the darkness of death that Jesus faces at the end of Lent unless we see glory in the heart of darkness. St. John's gospel you might remember sees Jesus glorified at the cross. The blinding light of God's freedom, and the total weakness of God in the cross, seem to be bound together in one person, Jesus Christ. In the Eastern Orthodox Icon of the Transfiguration, Christ is placed against a background of darker colour, and the disciples are thrown down in shock on the ground. Darker colour and sheer energy of light are both depicted together. In the Holy Land today, the mountain of the Transfiguration is situated to the southeast of Nazareth and south of the Sea of Galilee and Capernaum, Jesus' hometown, on the way to the Jordan valley that takes you up to Jerusalem. It is between Jesus' ministry and his heading towards Jerusalem, towards the history of rejection of God's presence.

Similarly, Moses and Elijah receive the meaning and purpose of their lives in the light of Christ, even though they came before. And so, our lives, like those of Moses and Elijah, may

have meanings we can't know of in this present moment. The real depth and significance of what we say or do now won't appear until more of the light of Christ has been seen.

Christ's light alone will make the final patterns coherent – the chosen one to whom we are called to listen. For we too are situated between these two stories. And when we frame our life between these two stories, we begin to see what kind of vision we need to have as Christians. Things look miserably dark and threatening? The spectre of war is upon us? Uncertain job prospects? Failing love relationships? What do we normally do – we 'good Christians'? We normally panic. On the other hand, things might be going rather well; we might feel that we have reached the climax of success. Our continent felt it reached the climax of civilisation at the end of the nineteenth century. What do we – 'good Christians' – do? We normally gloat (after which of course we had 2 world wars and mass killings at the heart of this civilisation). But, if our lives are framed between these two stories, then neither panic nor gloating will be possible for us. Things might be difficult. The world is a terrible place with threats of violence. We might also find the church feels unbearably difficult too. But we don't panic. We look deep into the heart of darkness and let the light of Christ show us how the freedom of God is there even in failure, and in crisis to bring life. Or, things are going well, which of course is a little less usual; the church might feel wonderful, the world is peaceful. How do we react? We think how our power and our peace, and our security might be turned by our sacrificial giving into love.

These two stories do not simply or only tell us how glory and sacrifice are blended in Jesus. They also tell us how we should understand our world, and indeed the church, how in our own growth we blend glory and the call to sacrifice. We might be wearing black armbands when things go badly, or we might be drinking champagne when things are going well. But these are only one part of the overall vision. The mystery of Jesus is precisely that glory is

most fully opened, its depths revealed in the very darkest moment of Jesus' death. William Blake two centuries ago, once prayed to be delivered from single vision and Newton's sleep. What he meant by Newton's sleep is the scientific world view a thing in itself, which gives a one-eyed vision of the world. It's very easy to see with one eye. But the Gospel calls us to have a wholesome binocular vision.

We can only do that when we allow ourselves to face Christ. If we lock ourselves in selfish fantasies about our own power or rightness, or righteousness, or might, then there is not much hope for a forgiven future. But, as we prepare to start Lent, we reflect on the violence of the cross, we come and face Christ here at the altar, where we have all that we need; in him all suffering, confusion, and our frustrations are transfigured. To him be glory for ever.

Fr Yazid Said