

Sunday 15 February 2026
The Sunday Next Before Lent

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Exodus 24:12-18

NT: 2 Peter 1:16-21

Gp: Matthew 17:1-9

We associate the story of the transfiguration that appears today in our lectionary with the festival in August. Is this a mistake on the part of those who put the lectionary together? Why Transfiguration Sunday just before Lent starts? It's a story that gets central attention in the calendar of the Eastern Orthodox Church with its highly poetic liturgical celebrations and iconographic glory. There is a very small but beautiful little book by Rowan Williams on praying with Icons, which I recommend to you as part of your reading for the coming season of Lent, in which he points how the icon is placed against a background of darker colour, with the disciples thrown down in shock on the ground, unable to comprehend how the reality of Christ's humanity is the full revelation of God and a fulfilment of the law and prophets as Moses and Elijah appear on both sides – the Son to whom we should listen.

Perhaps here lies the connection we need as we approach Lent. In all the three synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, immediately before the reported event on the Mount, we have words such as 'whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. Jesus said at the end of chapter 16 of Matthew's gospel: 'Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man in his kingdom'. The story frames the season of Lent with the darker background of the coming death of Christ. The writers of the gospels are portraying Christ's glory as that which is coupled with 'his glorious wounds', to use the language of the Orthodox liturgy.

Therefore, there are two stories that frame the season of Lent: The Transfiguration and Gethsemane, both of which have common features. Like at the Transfiguration, Peter, James and John join Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane as well as on the Mount of Transfiguration. On both occasions, they shrink in terror. Glory and light on one end, darkness and death on the other. Glory and light do not appear as a simple negation of the darkness and suffering that is to come at the end. The mountain that is traditionally associated with the transfiguration in the Holy Land is situated to the southeast of Nazareth, and south of the Sea of Galilee and Capernaum, Jesus' adopted home, on the way to the Jordan valley that takes you up to Jerusalem. Between Jesus' ministry in Galilee and his turning towards Jerusalem, towards the history of the rejection of God's presence and prophets, Jesus is revealed as God's chosen, in whom we shall find our rest, and to whom we are called to listen as indeed St Peter confirms to us in his second letter today. Whilst Peter witnesses the glory that was revealed, Moses in our first reading goes up the mountain into this cloud that covered the glory for forty days and forty nights.

How do we go about reflecting on these stories today? In all sorts of ways, our readings today reflect a truth about our lives, a truth that says that we all live lives that are often framed between opposing poles: light and darkness, life and death, God and sinful humanity. Often people who visit the Holy Land note how the biblical narrative still reflects the reality of the context of the land even today. They say, the plot remains the same, but the actors change. But, not only in the Holy Land. The wounds that seem to have afflicted the land seem to be globally felt. Human beings in all sorts of places are, as the collect reminded us today, not good at doing honour and justice to one another and we see it today in the dishonouring of the dignities of many. Appalling reactions to the politics of the Holy Land seem to be spreading against the Jewish communities here and elsewhere.

Such developments arouse in us rather confused reactions, with the increasing gravity of political crises across the world. We tend to panic in reaction to a threatening situation. But when there is stability at home, we often gloat. What we need to do instead is struggle to find the right balance that makes both panic and gloating impossible, that is the vision of humanity transfigured even in death and horror. When we are threatened by violence, when we think that the Church is a terrible place for all sorts of reasons, do we just react negatively? In the light of today's gospel, we are called to look into the depths and see God, in failure and in crisis, coming to bring life anew. When things are peaceful, instead of showing off our perfect ways of living, we perhaps ought to sharpen our concerns to relate to human interests and needs to the balance of the entire system of our world, politically, economically, and environmentally. Our power may be turned into sacrificial giving for shared interest: glory and sacrifice belong together.

How do we find that balance? First, we need to listen to the Son. We all have our injuries at various points of our lives. If we listen, live and stand firm in Christ, we may come to the perception of what is irreducibly beyond the world, knowing that the world is sustained by mercy and forgiving love without limit. If we do not listen to the Son, and take time to educate our feelings, we may be treading on dangerous grounds. The experience of the Holy Land shows that if we lock ourselves in selfish fantasies about our own power and might, then there is not much hope for a forgiven future. But, if we reflect on the violence of the cross, we have all that we need: suffering accepted and transfigured.

As we gather at the altar this morning, looking towards Lent, Holy Week and Easter with all its intensity of ritual and imaginative elaboration, we come knowing that this is the season that breaks down the walls of self-contained religion, or self-contained morality. Instead, here we gather around the one true holy place of the Christian faith, Christ himself. This is not a season of management, bargaining or rule-keeping simply, but a season of naked trust in that naked gift of God on the cross.

Fr Yazid Said