

St John's Evensong Sermon
on Sunday before Lent, 15.02.26 (Rev. James Shakespeare)

St Paul writes in 1 Cor. 4.6, words which I will go on to relate to today's Gospel reading (from Matthew 17), the story of Jesus' Transfiguration,

'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.'

There are moments in life when we climb a mountain, and the veil is pulled back, and (it's as if) we see & experience reality as it really is: the reality of God in Jesus Christ – in full glory. Moments - momentary glimpses - that are given to us (if our eyes & our hearts remain open), not to stay on the mountain-top, but for a purpose: to inspire, empower & equip the journey ahead, and the particular tasks given to each one of us, as witnesses to the divine glory.

Well, today, in our liturgical calendar – the Sunday before Lent – is given for such a purpose, to provide (at least in terms of our Bible readings) a mountain-top moment, or glimpse of God's glory; a vista from which to orientate our experience of Lent; empowering the 40 days ahead, as we prepare to journey to Jerusalem and the Cross, on the way to another mountain-top, Easter.

+ So today we journey, as witnesses – with Jesus' closest disciples, Peter, James & John - to the Mount of Transfiguration, the pivotal point of Jesus' ministry. And here we hear about Jesus, atop the mountain, becoming transfigured; and appearing in full glory, with Elijah & Moses, representing the law & the prophets. For it's only in Jesus that we see both law and prophets – twin pillars of the OT - fulfilled, as God's kingdom begins to dawn in human history; his covenant with human beings and his prophetic word, finally crystallising in the person of Jesus Christ, the image of the invisible God.

+What does the Divine voice say, after Peter's dazed response – for he's left speechless, not knowing what to say? A cloud appears & overshadows them (like the cloud, in Exodus, concealing the radiance of divine glory), and a voice says, 'This is my Son, the Beloved...with him I am well pleased... listen to him!'

It is impossible to fully imagine, what it must have been like, for Jesus' closest disciples, on that particular day, which they would never forget.

For they've been busy, under constant pressure, down in the valleys of human need... Jesus has been healing the sick, curing the deaf and the blind, preaching to the multitudes, and facing ever increasing criticism from the Pharisees.

The crowds are incessant, and the demands never seem to stop, and they are tired and overwhelmed. They know that Jesus is special, and mysteriously he's begun to predict that he will – not long from now – undergo great suffering, be rejected, be put to death & (this bit they didn't get at all) in three days rise...

But now they've left the crowds behind, and Jesus has taken them apart, up a high mountain, all by themselves, because he wants to show them something... God has a vision, a revelation, for them, which he has not yet given to any others, which will start to make sense of everything, show them who he really is, and empower them as witnesses.

As St Peter poignantly writes, many years later, in his Letter to the early Church, remembering the life-changing significance of that mountain-top moment, for him, and how it made his proclamation of Christ possible, empowering the paths that followed: *‘For we did not follow cleverly devised myths, when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ’ ‘but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honour and glory from God the Father, when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory...’*

So it is a pivotal moment, the Transfiguration, both in Jesus’ ministry & for the disciples, as the veil is pulled back & they experience reality – in Jesus Christ – as it really is; and are equipped for the road ahead. It is a time, however little they understand it, on that day, of joy and communion, as they experience the light and warmth of God’s glory, his presence and his power...

And in 2 Corinthians, we find St Paul – who, of course, wasn’t there at the Transfiguration, for he was not yet a Christian; but later, after the first Easter, he too met Jesus on the Damascus Road – also bearing witness to such an experience of Jesus Christ. For St Paul now points to the reality, post-Easter, for those who believe the witness of the apostles, that this same glory shines in the heart of all those for whom the light of the Gospel of Jesus had been given. *‘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.’*

In other words, amazingly, just as God brought light out of darkness in creation, **and** transfigured Jesus – in the presence of the disciples – on the mountain, so too this same light of Christ is accessible to all Christians, if we dare to believe in Him and come to him now in faith. Yes, all of us – Paul reminds the Corinthian believers – are invited to be transformed by this same light, the light of the Gospel of Christ, shining in our hearts, and our actions, as we follow Him. What was the experience, originally, of only a handful of chosen witnesses, becomes available to all, even though some have not yet dared to glimpse the transforming reality of God’s love. How amazing is that!

For all of us there are moments when the veil, the thin curtain separating heaven and earth is pulled back, and we begin to glimpse reality – the presence and loving purposes of God – as it really is... So how, I wonder, does today speak to us? And what might it have to say to us, as we prepare for the beginning of Lent?

I want to suggest, today, as we meditate on the mountain-top moment of Jesus’ Transfiguration and our own experience of God, that we each need – at the root of our witness – to return to that light; we need to dare (once more) to trust the presence of God in Jesus, and to believe in that light (the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ).

Yes, we need to take steps, this Lent – whatever our spiritual health – to return to His light, with all our heart. For as St Peter goes on to write, in his Letter, “You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place...”

So how might we do this? I want to suggest, especially, that we do this by our prayer (our conscious communication with God, being present and open to Him), and let me encourage you to pray in two ways, in particular, this Lent:

Firstly, take time – however you do it – to dwell in God’s word, the scriptures, in order to return to that source of light; whether that’s by personal meditation on the Bible (‘Lectio Divina’ or Holy Reading, as some people call it, when we take one short text and stay with it, patiently noticing what God’s saying to us through it);

or whether it's by participating in one of our Bible Study groups, Soul Space, or saying Morning Prayer or Compline, whether on your own (using the Daily Prayer app, or via borrowing one of our Common Worship Daily Prayer books), or with us via Zoom - details in e-news. So, firstly, there's taking time to dwell in the scriptures.

And secondly, I also encourage you, this Lent, to consider exploring another way of praying, of returning to the light; whether this is familiar or unfamiliar to you. Something that meets a need you have now, but perhaps in a new and unexpected way. It might be praying in silence, with a prayer word; or praying with nature, whilst out walking; or praying with art or poetry or listening to music. Taking time to imbibe God's presence and love, and rest in Him.

So I encourage you, this Lent, as well as praying with the Word, to pray with your senses, and to be open to the new thing that God wants to say to you.

And so, as we reflect on Jesus' transfigured on top of the mountain, and on moments when the veil has been pulled back in your own experience, I pray – this Lent – that you might glimpse afresh His glory; that you might be renewed and transformed in prayer, word & worship; and that you (with all God's saints) may experience, in your hearts & minds, the light of the knowledge of the glory of God, in the face of Jesus Christ. *Amen*