

CHURCH@HOME 27th February, 2022 – Sunday Next Before Lent

Readings: Exodus 34:29-35

Luke 9:28-36

Reflection from Anne Edwards

This coming Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, we enter into the season of Lent. I wonder how you approach this season? No chocolate, no biscuits, no alcohol? For Christians, it is traditionally a time of penitence and reflection before the pain of Holy Week and the subsequent joy of Easter, and Tim has described these six weeks as “a time to deepen our relationship with God through prayer, reflection and study”.

In our three year cycle of Lectionary readings, the transfiguration of Jesus is always read on this Sunday Next Before Lent (as it is called). We read it in Matthew, Mark and Luke, and each year a different reading from the Old Testament accompanies it.

Matthew’s version is accompanied by reading from Exodus 24 when God called Moses to go up to him on the Mountain, and will give him the tablets of stone with the law and commandment, which God had written for their instruction. In this passage, “The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai ... and God called to Moses out of the cloud ... Moses entered the cloud ... and was on the mountain for 40 days and nights”.

Mark’s version is accompanied by reading from 2 Kings chapter 2, when we read of Elijah ascending to heaven by a whirlwind, and Elisha taking on Elijah’s role as a prophet.

And today, Luke’s version is accompanied by Exodus chapter 34 where after the 40 days and nights Moses came out of the cloud, down the mountain with the two stone tablets and a face that was shining so much the Israelites were afraid to go near him, and Moses had to wear a veil.

When we read these passages, together with the gospel versions of the transfiguration, being in the physical presence of God can be a challenging experience, and it is no wonder those present were afraid.

In Christian teaching, the Transfiguration is a pivotal moment when Jesus is the bridge between heaven and earth – with Peter, James and John experiencing the event as spectators.

Immediately before the transfiguration of Jesus we have the scene where Peter confesses Jesus to be the Christ, the Messiah (ch.9:20), and Jesus begins to tell his disciples what lies ahead both for him, and for those who become his followers. About a week later, he takes the three up the mountain with him to pray (v.28). Note, it was while Jesus was praying that the

“appearance of his face changed and his clothes became dazzling white” (v.29). Luke makes the point that, although they were “weighed down with sleep”, on this occasion the disciples were awake and saw it all: Jesus’ transformed appearance, and those two great men of old, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. Then, afterwards, Jesus resolutely sets out for Jerusalem where the cross awaits him (ch.9:51).

How can this event be adequately described except in the words of Peter years later when he wrote his second letter: “... 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, saying, “This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.” 2 Peter, chapter 1:16b-18.

It's hard to imagine – even in these days of computer-generated special effects that anything could compare to the way Jesus appeared. After the short while of seeing Jesus do so many wonderful deeds, Peter, James and John finally saw who he really was.

In his book “Never Mind the Reversing Ducks”, Adrian Plass writes that if an occasion like this were to happen today, cameras, phones, tablets, ipads would appear in a flash – like Peter wanting to preserve the moment in the safely solid framework of a little dwelling or booth. However, it needs to be our hearts and minds that constitute the framework within which the Holy Spirit lives and moves. The shining must not be upon us so that we are seen, but from within us so that Jesus is visible.

Even in his most majestic and glorious, Jesus still had to face death as a man. Perhaps he needed the support of these special people, Moses and Elijah, as well as the voice of his Father as extra reassurance that he was indeed God’s son. Unlike the voice of God at Jesus’ baptism, we must remember that on this occasion the disciples heard God’s voice as well and were told “Listen to him.”

So we too need support and reassurance as we follow Jesus – and I encourage you to sign up to some of what is on offer here at St John’s and actively participate this Lent at a deeper spiritual level: the theme is “spiritual wellbeing: body, mind and soul”.