

## **The Sunday before Lent, 2024**

### **The Transfiguration: Mark 9:2-8**

I hope you didn't come expecting a cheerful sermon, because Lent is about to start, and Lent means you get a sermon about sin.

That, anyway, is what the Book of Common Prayer might lead you to believe. There is a little known service tucked away in there designed especially for use on the first day of Lent, with the warm and cuddly title of: 'A Commination, or Denouncing of God's Anger and Judgement against Sinners.' Here are its opening words:

**Brethern**, in the Primitive Church there was a godly discipline, that, at the beginning of Lent, such persons as stood convicted of notorious sin were put to open penance, and punished in this world, that their souls might be saved in the day of the Lord; and that others, admonished by their example, might be the more afraid to offend. Instead whereof, until the said discipline may be restored again, (which is much to be wished,) it is thought good, that at this time (in the presence of you all) should be read the general sentences of God's cursing against impenitent sinners, gathered out of the seven and twentieth Chapter of Deuteronomy, and other places of Scripture; and that ye should answer to every Sentence, *Amen*: To the intent that, being admonished of the great indignation of God against sinners, ye may the rather be moved to earnest and true repentance; and may walk more warily in these dangerous days; fleeing from such vices, for which ye affirm with your own mouths the curse of God to be due.

There follows a list of the things by which God's anger is provoked, and an exhortation which emphasises how richly we deserve what would be coming to us – the phrase 'fire and brimstone' is actually used - were it not for our repentance, and God's mercy. And it has to be said that the Communion is fairly typical of the BCP in this dark view of the human situation. At every Sunday Evensong, the congregation here describes itself as a collection of 'miserable sinners'; in the Prayer Book communion service we 'acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness', how we have 'provoked most justly thy wrath and indignation against us.' Even in this service, we will describe ourselves as unworthy even to gather up the crumbs that fall from God's table.

Christianity, it seems, is sin obsessed. And this is one of the reasons why people have turned away from it in great droves. As Richard Dawkins so rightly puts it – and you won't hear me saying that very often: 'what a nasty little pre-occupation to have dominating your life.'<sup>1</sup> Christianity seems to crush all the joy out of things. It takes the experience of living in a beautiful world, of being able to think and dream and create, and turns it into morbidity and guilt. William Blake puts the protest best in his poem 'The Garden of Love'.

*I went to the Garden of Love,  
And saw what I never had seen;  
A Chapel was built in the midst,  
Where I used to play on the green.*

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<sup>1</sup> God Delusion, p.252

*And the gates of this Chapel were shut  
And "Thou shalt not," writ over the door;  
So I turned to the Garden of Love  
That so many sweet flowers bore.*

*And I saw it was filled with graves,  
And tombstones where flowers should be;  
And priests in black gowns were walking their rounds,  
And binding with briars my joys and desires.*

Tombstones where flowers should be, and priests in black gowns. Welcome to Lent. This is, after all, the season *par excellence* where we contemplate sin – where we confess our share in the evil that crucified Christ, and come before his cross in sorrow and repentance. It is where we discipline our selfish selves – where we make a special effort to know and fight the sin within us – greed, lust, anger, pride, whatever our poison happens to be. This is the time, surely, when sin should be at the centre of our concerns.

Which makes it odd, does it not, that the Church should choose this Gospel for today, the Sunday before Lent? Here we are, poised on the brink of the season, perhaps wondering where our own battle lines need to be drawn, perhaps needing to be reminded of the seriousness of sin – and what does the Church give us to read? The story of the Transfiguration, where you will search in vain for any mention of the matter. It is as if our attention is deliberately being wrested away from our inner condition, and being placed firmly on the glory of Christ, whose face was changed and whose clothes became dazzling white. We are not to look on the darkness of our nature, but on Heaven's bright sun in the face of Jesus.

When we enter Lent thinking of the Transfiguration, things are changed around. It is not that sin is unimportant, it is not that there are no serious moral flaws running in each one of us – there is still a place for talk of sin and judgement in the Gospel, an essential place. But this story reminds us why the Gospel is Gospel – good news. From the beginning, the Church understood what those disciples saw on the mountain top as a glimpse of what it meant to say Christ was raised from the dead – that his humanity was wonderfully, unimaginably transformed, that his frail body shone with the glory of God. And for the early Church, the whole point of Jesus coming to us was that that meant we too would be changed, unimaginably transformed. Athanasius, one of the great bishops of the early Church, summed up the teaching of the New Testament in this way: ‘He became human, so that we might become divine’.

‘He became human, so that we might become divine.’ If that is so, then the meaning of Lent is changed around. Sin is not at the centre of our vision; rather our eyes should be on the prize, on where we are going. Next to the glory, our sin is nothing. In the power of the resurrection, our sin is as significant as a stone thrown at the Sun, if you could do such a thing: the largest rock would be burned up, consumed, turned into fire and glory of its own. Here on the brink of Lent, we’re being told not to take our sin too seriously – because serious as it is, our divine destiny takes it and transforms it and as Paul (almost) says, swallows it up in victory.

So what should you do about this reading? Here's a thought. Lent starts on Wednesday. Perhaps you haven't thought at all yet about what to do or not do; perhaps you've fallen into the mistake of thinking it is primarily about how much chocolate you eat or alcohol you drink. Either way, on the back of this Gospel, think about how your Lent might be more than self-loathing or self-improvement. How might you make the time to think about where you are going, to think about the glory that God wants to make of you? What might help you to do that: might it be a conversation, a book, a place, a piece of music or art? As ever, I'm more than willing to help any of you explore all this privately, as much as I can. How will you learn just a little of what Peter, James, and John saw on the mountain? That is a fairly good agenda for Lent. I wish you the best in keeping it. Amen.