

Sunday next before Lent

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on Sunday 27 February 2022

Readings: 2 Corinthians 3 v 12 – 4 v 2 and Luke 9 vv 28-36

The Transfiguration is one of the most significant events in Jesus' ministry. Whilst we cannot state its precise timing, it is clearly one of the most profound and important moments, both for Jesus and the disciples who were privileged to observe it, between the beginning of Jesus' public ministry at his baptism, which we remembered just a few weeks ago, and his crucifixion for which we begin to prepare during the season of Lent which begins in just a few days, on Ash Wednesday.

Chapter nine of St Luke's gospel is packed with significance. Jesus gives the disciples authority to confront the powers of evil and sends them out on mission, 'bringing the good news and curing diseases everywhere'. Then follows a quiet time of retreat and, we can perhaps assume, debriefing on the disciples' mission work, before the crowds track down Jesus. As there are so many in the crowd and they are reluctant to go home, Jesus provides a meal for them, in the miracle which we know as 'the feeding of the five thousand'.

The Transfiguration comes eight days after Jesus has a frank discussion with the disciples. 'Who do you say that I am?' he asks them. To which Peter answers, 'The Messiah of God'.

Because Peter has that insight into Jesus' nature, he, with James and John, is afforded a unique privilege. He is a witness to the Transfiguration.

The Transfiguration is a moment of encounter. It is a precious and never-to-be-repeated moment when Jesus' divine nature is revealed to the three disciples who have the privilege of accompanying Jesus up the mountain. It is a moment in which Jesus is confirmed and, no doubt, encouraged in his ministry and in his destiny. It is a moment which is of such profound significance that we can perhaps begin to understand why they kept silence and 'told no one any of the things they had seen.'

Peter wants to capture the moment. Without thinking, he offers to build some shelters for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. But that will not do. Peter must have been highly relieved that his embarrassment was overshadowed by the affirming words of God, 'This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him.'

There is no further opportunity to capture the moment or to linger on the mountain. As soon as they descend, the crowd presses in on Jesus, with desperate human problems that demand his attention. But immediately after Jesus has responded to this, he has to deal with a squabble between the disciples over their importance and hierarchy.

We can understand the significance of the Transfiguration because we remember significant moments in our lives. Some may cause us to squirm. But others, we will cherish: such as significant events and anniversaries; and meeting people who have a profound significance on us.

There are some dates which have a wide significance. Even if they know little about the history of the country, many people in England will know that Duke William of Normandy and the Norman army sailed to the south coast of England in October 1066, and defeated King Harold and his army. We remember that the First World War began

in 1914 and the Second, in 1939. This year, we celebrate the Platinum Jubilee of Her Majesty The Queen, whose reign began on 6 February 1952. Other dates have a significance to particular age groups and communities. Those of a certain age may well remember where they were when President John F Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas, on 22 November 1963. For others, the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, on 31 August 1997 will have a similar significance.

Will 24 February 2022 be remembered in that same way, the day when we awoke to the news of the unwarranted invasion of Ukraine by the Russian army and air force? Perhaps, like me, you have been shocked at the possibility that a Western country, a fledgling democracy of some 44 million people, can be invaded by its neighbour, by people who share the same ethnicity? I wept last night as I watched people trying to get on a train from Lviv in western Ukraine to Poland. There were no words, but simply tears, as I met some Ukrainian women at the vigil in St Peter Port yesterday evening.

And, as so often in such times, I turn to the prophecy of Micah:

The Lord shall judge between many peoples,
and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away;
they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,
and their spears into pruning-hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more;
but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees,
and no one shall make them afraid;
for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken.

I pray to God that the people of Ukraine will 'sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid'.

And as I pray, I remember those words of Nick Baines, the Bishop of Leeds, which I quoted in this weekend's newsletter:

'Prayer is not just about bringing our fears and hopes and dreads and concerns to God, but it is also about learning to look through the eyes of God who loves justice, condemns lying and misrepresentation, and abhors the violence of the powerful. Prayer changes us before it changes anything else. Common prayer shuts us up, opens us up, reframes our priorities and calls us to a practical solidarity with those who suffer.'

In the name of God, who weeps for his people, may it be so.