

Sunday before Lent

A sermon preached at the parish church of St Andre de la Pommeraye Guernsey on 11 February 2018 by the Rector, the Very Revd Tim Barker

Readings: 2 Kings 2.1-12 and Mark 9.2-9

So many characters need a foil, a contrast if you like, who allows us to see the true depth and nature of the character. The stand-up comedian may be able to keep us amused, but I have to say that the comedy pairs seem to me to give greater richness in their humour. Imagine how much poorer Eric Morecambe would have been without Ernie Wise, John Cleese as Basil Fawlty without Andrew Sachs as Manuel, and so on. The One Ronnie might never have lasted as long as that pairing of Ronnie Barker and Ronnie Corbett. But looking again at this list, I fear I am in danger of showing either my age or when I stopped watching television comedy.

It's equally true of the great fictional detectives: Morse needs Lewis, and Lewis needs Hathaway. Poirot relies on Captain Hastings, and Sherlock Holmes on Watson. Don Quixote needs Sancho Panza. Bunter's wise stability is essential to allow Lord Peter Wimsey to flourish. And so on and so on.

Fiction is often only credible if it describes a reality with which we can identify. In Meditation XVII, John Donne describes human reality:

No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as any manner of thy friends or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind.

And the Bible, emphatically truth because it is the Word of God, unfolds - in story after story of interdependent relationship.

Elijah is a central character in both readings today. Unlike some earlier prophets like Samuel, he does not walk easily with the powerful. After his bruising experiences with Ahab and Jezebel, he came to the conclusion that he alone was faithful to God. At his lowest point, God speaks to Elijah in the 'still small voice' and commands him to anoint Elisha as his successor. No longer is Elijah alone, with Elisha inseparable - as we see at the beginning of the first reading, when Elisha refuses Elijah's request that he goes no further: 'As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.'

The journey of the two prophets has strong reminders of the Exodus story, in which the people of Israel travel under Moses' leadership from slavery in Egypt to the promised land. Elijah divides the waters allowing them to cross the river easily - a strong echo of Moses at the Red Sea. Elisha's succession to Elijah's role reminds us of the transfer of authority from Moses to Joshua.

God always plans for the continuation of his work from one leader to another, with the one preparing the successor and so on across the generations.

And so we move to the mount of transfiguration - an event of such significance in Jesus' ministry that we find it in three of the four gospels. St Peter refers to it in his second letter and St John alludes to it in the prologue to his gospel: 'We have seen his glory, such glory as befits the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth.'

Moses and Elijah had both yearned for a new state of relationship between God and his people - and here they have a privileged glimpse of what is to come. As, of course, do Peter, James and John. The disciples who are to have such a key role in proclaiming the new relationship between God and his people that Jesus opens to us by his death on the cross and his resurrection are also allowed to see the glory that is to come, looking through the veil that

separates this world from eternity. Moses was the only person previously allowed to see God and live. The dazzling glory of the transfigured Jesus can have left the disciples in no doubt – although we can sympathise with their all too human reaction: '[Peter] did not know what to say, for they were terrified.'

It is in Mark's gospel that it becomes most clear that the transfiguration is a hinge moment. The transfiguration comes six days after Peter has spoken at Caesarea Philippi. In answer to Jesus' question, 'Who do you say that I am?', Peter replies, 'You are the Messiah.' Then comes the transfiguration. And the second half of Mark's gospel is given over to teaching what discipleship means and the journey towards Jerusalem where Jesus is to be crucified. Only then does what has been promised in the transfiguration become an eternal reality.

Moses handed over to Joshua, and Elijah to Elisha. Jesus prepared the disciples for their role, which began in earnest on the day of Pentecost. We are their descendants, people who have glimpsed the glory of God in Jesus and who are commissioned to tell the story. There will be times when following Jesus and the task of encouraging others to follow him feel anything but glorious. The glimpses of future glory which we see in the transfiguration, on Easter Day and even, please God, as we gather for worship, enlighten the darkness. And as we enter Lent on Ash Wednesday this coming week, we hold on to the promises of God.