

Sunday before Lent, 2nd March 2014



St Mary's Kidlington

Rev'd Mervyn Puleston on Transfiguration and Lent

When I was Vicar of Clifton Hampden I helped to lead a parish pilgrimage visit we made to Israel, several people from this parish joined us, and some of us climbed Mount Sinai, we did it by moonlight, and it seemed almost as bright as day, it was bitterly cold, and there was snow on the summit. We stayed until dawn and saw the sun rising over the desert, and as it did so every rock turned red, it was if the whole place was on fire.

Sinai is a wilderness rather than desert and all the small shrubs also turned a fiery red. It was here that it is believed that Moses encountered God in the burning bush, then went down to Egypt and brought out the children of Israel, who dwelt in this wilderness for forty years before finally entering the promised land. It was here on the summit of this mountain Moses came face to face with God and was given the ten commandments which was the basis of the old covenant that God made with his people. "I will be your God if you will be my people and obey my commandments." Sinai is indeed still a very extraordinary place, and I will not forget walking down to St. Katharine's monastery with the first beams of light reflecting off the dome of the church. Suddenly there was a whirring sound and a whole flock of quails flew past us.

We can trace the relationship that the Israelites had with their God over the centuries in the Old Testament in which God constantly reminds the children of Israel of their covenant with God and their frequent refusal to keep it. On top of Mount Sinai is Elijah's chapel where it is believed that when Elijah fled from the wrath of Jezebel he heard the still small voice, after the fire and wind, with the message to call people back to God, and to get rid of the existing regime.

Our Gospel for this Sunday, the Sunday before, gives another account of a mountain top encounter. Some people believe that this too took place on Mount Sinai, others believe that it took place on the top of Mount Hermon which rises 6000 feet above sea level just north of Israel in The Lebanon, when I saw it at this time of the year it was still covered with snow and people were skiing on it. The account of the Transfiguration is told in all four Gospels and so the evangelists must have considered it to be a very important part of the Jesus' life. We celebrate the feast on August 6th, a date that will ever be associated with the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima.

So why have these lessons been chosen for this Sunday as we prepare to enter the season of Lent? We believe that this event took place not long before the crucifixion, and that here, we believe, Jesus was, just as Moses brought in the old covenant, he was about to bring in the new covenant through his death and resurrection. In the Old Testament we find that God sends prophets to call his people back to God, their basic message was "Stop acting as you do and start acting as God wants you to." We also find Moses giving the law to the people, the ten commandments, they were and are a basic code of behaviour, given originally to a nomadic people to enable them to live in peace and harmony and survive. In the end Jesus came to bring God's message to his people in a way that they would understand. A new commandment I give you, that you Love one another, these words were spoken at the Last Supper, after Jesus had washed the disciples' feet.

The other idea behind the transfiguration is that Jesus reflected the Glory of God, he showed how humanity should really be, not debased but glorious. And that all God's people can, as the first chapter of St John tells us, become true children of God. "We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only begotten Son." God does not want to punish us he wants to make us into better people, in fact he wants to turn us into saints, holy people, set aside for God, and changing our un-holiness into holiness. In the early church when a person wished to convert to Christianity he became a Catechumen, and it became customary for new Christians to be admitted at Easter. Lent became a time for the final preparation for that moment, and very soon the rest of the Christians joined them.

The Old Testament laws became very complicated, not just ten commandments but hundreds of other

precepts, some of which applied to a people living in hot conditions, dietary law like not eating pork or shellfish, others concerned keeping the Sabbath, which Jesus appears of have broken on several occasions and which brought him into contention with the Jewish authorities. And many of them had ceased to have anything to do with real life at the time.

I think what God might say to us is, "I don't mind that you have eaten pork, or played cricket on Sunday, I do care if you have been irresponsible with your own life, or the lives of others. That you are a temple of the Holy Spirit made in the image of God, and that you should treat everyone, including yourself as Holy."

Our bodies are a gift from God, and they needs to be properly treated; we need nourishment, exercise, sleep, temperance, mental and spiritual feeding, treating our bodies in the right way. Other people too need to be treated in the right way whoever they may be, their life is a gift too and it needs to be respected.

Lent should be a time of growth, and whatever we decide to do, if we decide to do anything should be done in order to improve our relationship with God and our neighbour. Lent is called a penitential season, and a penance is an action intended to show that we are sorry for having sinned. It is a way of saying sorry to God and showing you mean it, and it is known as an act of contrition, it is not a punishment but a way of saying sorry to God. If you perhaps upset or offend someone you may want to say sorry, apologise, you might do it by sending flowers, a bottle of wine, a box of chocolates. In same way if we do chose to say sorry to God for the way we have offended him, by making a special effort it Lent to show we mean it. It may be giving something up, or it may take a positive form. There are no set rules. It is up to the individual.

Some years ago a dear friend told me this story. For a time she lived in New York, where her husband was the Dutch Ambassador to the United Nations. She attended the Episcopal Church of St. Thomas where High Mass on a Sunday was held with all the Anglo Catholic trimmings and a bevy of servers. The head server was a New York traffic cop. One Sunday the Vicar of the church was motoring home on the free way and as it was quiet he exceeded the speed limit. Suddenly he heard the wailing of police siren and was pulled over by the rider. The police cop came to the window and the Vicar immediately recognised him to be his server. "Your not going to give me a ticket are you?" he asked, but the server replied, "I am sorry Father but I it is my duty, I can't show favouritism." So he wrote out a ticket and stuck it in the priest's breast pocket, and with the words "Go careful now Father and drove off." When the priest got home and had got ready for bed he pulled out the offending ticket. It read, "For you penance Father say three Hail Mary's and three Our Fathers, and don't speed again."

It may cost you something in effort or time to say sorry to God, but it is nothing compared with the suffering that Jesus underwent to redeem us from our sins.

*Thanks be to you, our Lord Jesus Christ,
for all the benefits which you have given us,
for all the pains and insults which you have borne for us.*

*Most merciful Redeemer, Friend and Brother,
may we know you more clearly,
love you more dearly,
and follow you more nearly,
day by day.*

Amen.

Mervin Puleston