

Sermon for the Sunday before Lent: 14 Feb 2021 *Mother Emma*

We stand this Sunday on the threshold of Lent.

It is extraordinary to think that it was during this season of prayer and penitence that we first entered into lockdown last March. For many, the events of the last year may have had the feeling that we have been living through what seemed like an endless penitential season, as we have prayed, longed for signs of hope, denied ourselves precious time with loved ones, grieved and often faced sickness and the fear of death ourselves. We might say that we have already given up so much over the last year - and we know how essential it is that we continue to hold back from mixing with one another, re-starting our activities and taking risks for just a short time longer - that talk of Lenten self-denial or “giving things up” may have a hollow ring to it this year.

There has been an increasing sense in the Church of England over the past decade or so, that Lent should be seen as much as a time of learning, of service and supremely of prayer, than as the time of self-denial it had become – or worse, simply time for a token “giving up” of a regular pleasure.

Instead, the Eucharistic Preface during the Lent season encourages us: *Through fasting, prayer and acts of service you bring us back to your generous heart. Through study of your holy word you open our eyes to your presence in the world and free our hands to welcome others into the radiant splendour of your love.*

As we contemplate the weeks ahead, could we see them as a time to re-examine our lives and our relationship with God in preparation for walking with Jesus through the events of Holy Week and Easter. If we take any extra time which lockdown and isolation have created to immerse ourselves in prayer and study of God’s word, we might be inspired and encouraged to reach out our hands to others once again in love and service and welcome, showing them the mystery and beauty of God’s glory. But we might also be reminded that, as we see in the deeply mystical Gospel story of Jesus’ transfiguration on the mountain, we can be assured of the strength, hope and inspiration which spending time in God’s presence may offer us all.

The story itself seems somehow to hover on that shadowy threshold between heaven and earth. On the one hand, we see Jesus transfigured and brilliant with the glory of heaven, we hear the voice of God Himself, and we are told that the ancient and long-gone figures of Moses and Elijah, are nonetheless somehow present there on the mountain with Jesus.

On the other hand, there are the three very earthly disciples, worn out by their climb up the mountain, and struggling to stay awake even in the face of glory.

In books and films, there is often an image of a magical “portal”, a place where you can glimpse, or communicate with two worlds at once. In the Narnia books by C S Lewis, which are, after all,

deeply Christian stories, there are a good many of these. Perhaps the best known is the Wardrobe, in the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, inside which it is possible to be aware both of the fur coats hanging up in the wardrobe, and the snow on the ground in the mystical land of Narnia.

In the Bible, the top of a mountain is often seen as one of those places where heaven and earth can come very close together and one can almost get a glimpse of both. Jesus often went up onto a mountain to pray, perhaps partly calculating that many people would not have the stamina to follow him there, but also perhaps because of the mountain's traditional position as a liminal, holy place.

The two heavenly figures from Israel's history, Moses and Elijah, who appear beside him there, also remind us of other, mountain-top experiences in the Bible, which have brought hope and strength. Moses had prayed for help in calming and drawing together the fractious people of Israel who had followed him out into the wilderness. In response he experienced the glory of God on top of Mount Horeb in the Sinai desert, when he was given the Ten Commandments; the rules by which a godly society should live, and as he descended from the mountain, his face shone with the glory he had encountered.

Elijah, meanwhile, also had a conversation with God on Mount Horeb. He had gone there to complain to God, in exhaustion, fear and despair, that the people of Israel had turned away from their Lord, and would not listen to him, and instead wanted to kill him. God's response to Elijah on the mountain top was to show him that the glory of God may also be found in absolute stillness – the still, small voice which brings comfort, courage and hope. And God also strengthened him for the task by allowing him to anoint a successor, and as we heard in our Old Testament reading, Elijah was allowed to rest from his labours, and was taken up into heaven in glory, as indeed, is Jesus at the Ascension. The presence of Moses and Elijah on the mountain reminds us of the powerful experience of prayer in holy places which can bring us so close to God that we feel we can hear his voice when we most need it.

Jesus himself is transfigured by prayer on this particular mountain, and it is suggested in other Gospels that the words spoken to him by Moses and Elijah were of comfort and encouragement as he prepared for his final, terrifying journey.

We often talk about our Lenten "disciplines", which have come to be associated with depriving ourselves of chocolate or something similar. Yet the traditional disciplines of the Church are based around worship and prayer – finding time to be with God. The experiences of Moses, Elijah and Christ himself bring home to us the importance of dedicating time to God – now in this final season of enforced self-denial, as a source of inspiration and hope.

So as we enter the solemn reflection of the Lenten season, let us follow Christ's example on the mountain and turn to God in prayer as we contemplate the journey before us. Then we too, like Moses and Elijah, may be given comfort for the present time and strengthened for the future, whatever lies ahead. **Amen**