

Sunday next before Lent, Eucharist

Exodus 34:29 -end

2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2

Luke 9: 28-36

Mother Emma Dinwiddy Smith

Sometimes in life we find ourselves at a crossroads. It may be a crossroads for us personally, for our families, our nation, or the world. The possible ways ahead may be opaque, or they may be clear and frightening; the choice between them may be ours to make, or may be made by others, leaving us feeling impotent and anxious.

Today we have been asked to pray for peace and for the resolution of the conflict in Ukraine, a situation which has the potential to feel like a terrifying turning-point as nations and leaders assess the way forward. Our hearts go out to those who are suffering pain, injury, bereavement or loss.

Can prayer really make a difference at such times?

We may feel that we would wish to do something more active – to sign petitions, join vigils or demonstrations – to express our sadness and horror at attacks on innocent civilians, but perhaps the story we remember each year on this, the final Sunday before Lent, reminds us of the vital and visceral call to prayer at such times.

The setting for our reading from Luke's Gospel today is that of a crossroads in the life and ministry of Jesus; in the faith journey of his disciples and in the salvation history of the world.

So far in this Gospel, we have encountered Jesus has behaved like any ordinary Biblical prophet – if such a thing as an "ordinary prophet" exists – living an itinerant lifestyle followed by his disciples and by crowds of people attracted by his ethical preaching or his healing skills.

Occasionally, there is a glimpse of recognition amongst those closest to him – as when Peter declares, "You are the Messiah of God."

Jesus swears his disciples to secrecy, but he tries to tell them about the way ahead – that he must undergo great suffering and be killed and rise again on the third day – though it is not at all clear how much of this the disciples were able to grasp. Jesus himself seems increasingly aware of the way he has to travel, and of the coming turning-point in their shared journey. We can only assume he knew what his arrival in Jerusalem would mean for him, but also for his followers; and perhaps he was even aware of the violent crushing and destruction of Israel by the vast Roman Empire which would follow less than forty years later.

His response to the deepening knowledge of the horror to come, as to many things throughout his life, is to decide to go up a mountain, to be quiet and to pray. Out of this deep and heartfelt prayer comes both comfort and an experience which, at least in hindsight, will show the disciples the route which both Jesus and they will now be following – the Way of the Cross.

It will provide a revelation of Jesus' true nature, even if, once again, they fail to understand it completely at the time. During this narrative, we are told, "They saw his glory." The glory of the Lord, sometimes known as "Shekinah" is a central concept in the Jewish understanding of God.

The word "Shekinah" means in Hebrew "he caused to dwell", but it has been interpreted as a divine visitation of the presence or indwelling of the Lord God. The Shekinah is manifested in dazzling light, (we heard in our first reading of the dazzling splendour reflected in Moses' face after he had been in the presence of the Lord), or it may be in unexplained fire, like that of the burning bush which never burnt up.

On top of the mountain, as Jesus prays, we – and the disciples with him – witness this dazzling light in Jesus' face and clothes. At the same time, they are overshadowed by a cloud from which they hear the voice of God.

There can be no doubt that this narrative draws the clear connection between Jesus and the divine presence of God. In his time of heartfelt prayer, at this crucial moment of his ministry, Jesus is revealed as a manifestation of the glory of God. The moment is made all the more mysterious and powerful by the appearance of those two great prophets of old, Moses and Elijah, who themselves have witnessed God's glory with their own eyes, and who speak to Jesus about his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.

But all of this – the manifestation of God's glory, the indwelling presence of God, the encouragement and the pointing out of the right way forward, arises from the deep stillness of prayer. As we ourselves, whether individually or as a nation, face times of fear and uncertainty about what lies ahead, the message of this Gospel reading is clear. Much as we may long to leap into definitive action, it is in actively looking for the time and the space in our busy lives and frenetic anxieties to still our hearts before God, to listen for his voice, that we can hope find the way becoming clearer before us.

On this day of prayer for peace in Ukraine, we can pray fervently that the world's leaders too will pause for a moment, to find the space in which they could hear God's voice and discern the right way forward to speak and act for peace and justice in God's world. We could pray that those suffering at this time may themselves become conscious of the glorious presence of God, with them even in the depths of despair, and leading them onwards.

Of course, we must speak out at all times for the central Christian belief that every human being is made in the image of God, and not one of them is dispensable to satisfy the desires of another, but we can also add the deepest prayers of our hearts for peace and hope to those of millions of people praying around the world.

St Paul, in our Epistle, described the way that, as Christians who wait on the presence of God, "we are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another, for this comes from the Lord."

As the depth of our prayer translates into lives which reflect the glory of God, so we too may discern the right way at the crossroads, and point ahead for others towards the presence and the will of God.