

Quinquagesima Evensong 2019

Lent approaches

Can it be that the Sundays fly by so quickly that already and that Lent and indeed Easter are already in sight? The clue for us liturgically is that today is Quinquagesima Sunday – about 50 days until the great Feast. Indeed we have already had Septuagesima and Sexagesima, about 70 and 60 days respectively before Easter, and I, for one, am happy that we still have sight of these time-honoured Sundays which lead us into and prepare us for the Season of Lent – the Season of -about 40 days. Call me old-fashioned, but these titles seem to add to the richness of the liturgical year. The ‘Last Sunday before Lent’ doesn’t cut it for me!

In being reminded of our liturgical pathway though the year, we can prepare to keep a good Lent, to enter fully into the fulness of the death and resurrection of the Lord. In doing so, we are drawn to the knowledge of the gift of Jesus to each of us. The Resurrection draws us to the one who broke the cycle of death and destruction which has been the understanding at the heart of humanity since we became sentient beings. His death and resurrection reveal that we are all called to resurrection life. As I have often said before, this is as much about here and now as about the promise of our future journey into the heart of God’s Love which is our great hope and indeed the assurance of our faith.

As we see in our second reading, Jesus himself is portrayed by John as struggling with the prospect of death: *‘Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say - “Father, save me from this hour”? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.’ Then a voice came from heaven, ‘I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.’* It’s a vivid moment in the Gospel of John, where the theology of death and resurrection is at the very heart of all that we read about. No wonder that the people can’t grasp this, thinking they are hearing thunder, because we can hardly do so ourselves. How can it be that the moment of crucifixion seems to be climax of what Jesus achieves for humanity, as John writes, *‘And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.’ He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.’?*

I think that John really wants to test us; to make us think about our faith. Ultimately, he draws us forward from this moment, yet in faith terms it remains the most profound event for humanity, and indeed Christologically for the whole of creation. In the light of the death and resurrection of Jesus, all must look at creation with new eyes. In doing this we are reminded that we as Christians, by definition, are always looking forward. We are people who, if we allow our faith to shape how we approach life, find ourselves with a unique way of viewing the entirety of our existence. Whilst, as St Paul reminds us in that great passage from the First Letter to the Corinthians, we may see through a glass darkly, nevertheless, we do, through faith, understand the glory which God draws us into through his Son - the transformation brought about through the self-giving love of Jesus Christ.

This morning the Gospel passage was about the Transfiguration, and it was linked to the Exodus passage about the face of Moses shining after his encounter with God. This evening, we have the first encounter he has with the Divine Presence in the burning bush, and we

remember that this person, depicted earlier as a prince of Egypt, is now a mere shepherd with lots of hang-ups. He feels that he is not up to the job of leading his own people from slavery to freedom. He is tongue-tied and not a clear speaker. Yet ultimately, he achieves all of this and more. There are many struggles along the way, but he allows the light of God to work within his life, and this brings about transformation not just for him but for his entire people. In other words, Moses lives his life as one of a radical journey as he allowed God's indwelling Spirit to work within. It was his choice.

We see the same thing at play in this passage from John. Jesus struggles with his own humanity, yet ultimately transforms the world through not withholding himself from the reality of humanity and creation. In uniting himself to every aspect of our experience, he draws us to the greater reality to which all are called – the knowledge that all that exists is shot through with the creative and redemptive power of a Love beyond our understanding. In this, we are called to leave no aspect of our lives out of sight of the light revealed in the face of Jesus Christ. Indeed, in all that we engage with, the light of Christ must be allowed to inform all that we do in the same spirit led journey.

When we look at the parlous state of our national politics, the rise of all sorts of nasty (and deadly) prejudice, the questions about the identity of our nation (including the dreaded 'B' word); all must be approached through our call to reveal the light which broke the cycle of hatred and death through the creation shattering power of self-giving love.



Byzantine mosaic of Moses and the Burning Bush

Exodus 3: 1-6

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. 2 There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. 3 Then Moses said, 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.' 4 When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, 'Moses, Moses!' And he said, 'Here I am.' 5 Then he said, 'Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.' 6 He said further, 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

John 12: 27-36a

27 'Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—"Father, save me from this hour"? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. 28 Father, glorify your name.' Then a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.' 29 The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, 'An angel has spoken to him.' 30 Jesus answered, 'This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. 31 Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. 32 And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people[e] to myself.' 33 He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die. 34 The crowd answered him, 'We have heard from the law that the Messiah remains for ever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?' 35 Jesus said to them, 'The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. 36 While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light.'