

A SERMON IN KING'S COLLEGE CHAPEL

Sunday 23 February 2020

Quinquagesima

I for one wish to have a greater life, something more satisfying, more full, more wondrous than anything I experience now. And I don't think I am very different from anyone here. Just think, do you want to be happy? Of course, you do. Do you want to have even greater happiness than you may (if you're lucky!) be experiencing now? Of course, you do. If so, then you too want to have this greater life. You want a felicity that is boundless. You, *we* want a life transfigured.

I love that word 'transfigured'. It seems to sum up the longing of the heart: to be as we are and yet somehow other, more glorious, filled with the infinite life of God. It is what was seen by Peter, James and John on the mountain: Jesus resplendent in the glory that, as the eternal God bodily present in time, he always has, and Jesus the human being as we will know him at the end of time. The thing is that Jesus the human being draws us to be as he is. Through his death and resurrection, much talked about in this part of Matthew's Gospel, he works his transformation on us so that we too can become children of God, adopted to be as he is, sharers like him in the divine nature. His transfiguration not only shows him in his everlasting splendour, it prefigures who we shall be: co-heirs with Christ, splendid, through participation, in Godhead.

This picture, fascinating as it may be for the heart, is more than a picture and more than an appeal to the heart. Precisely because it is an unveiling of truth and full of emotion, it is also a call to action, to welcome what it tells us into our own lives.

How? Well, the first thing to be said is that what is transfigured in Jesus is his bodiliness. Not just his face shines, but his clothing also. It is his entire physical reality that is laden with the glory of Godhead. And we too are embodied beings. We are bodies just as he, and through our bodies we are present as persons in the world, act in the world, relate to others in the world, just as he. Let's appreciate this bodily fact. Too often we fall into the temptation of bogus spirituality and forget about the importance of our flesh and all its needs. The body is sacred. We love others in their bodies with and through our bodies. There is no act of love that we do that we do without our bodies – even prayer because even in the heights or depths of contemplation we are always embodied beings who pray, and who sometimes even nod off – just to emphasize the truth of our embodiment. So, if we are called, as we are called, to love our neighbours, we do this *through our* bodies and, in the first instance, *to them* in *their* bodies.

We are so fortunate as Christians in the Church! We have access to a means to raise up our bodiliness to share in divinity, energizing and inspiring us to be for others as they would have us be for them, to be, indeed, as Jesus was and still is for all. It is in the Eucharist. Let's hear again the stunning words of the Prayer of Humble Access, which come from the service of Holy Communion in the Book of Common Prayer and are still to be found in Common Worship. They ask for us so to eat the flesh of God's dear Son Jesus Christ and to drink his blood 'that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body and our souls washed through his most precious blood'. This is not teaching some strange doctrine that each kind or species, either bread or wine, of the Sacrament only does one thing, but that through the Eucharist the whole person in their physical personhood (the body) and in their life (the soul) is offered the grace of transformation. This opens us to 'evermore dwell in Christ, and he in us': our touch, our love, our energy-in-loving is his. We are him in the world – at least if we live accordingly.

Let's pause a moment just to dwell on the implications of this. If our loving is Christ's then we are, all of us, his acting in the world; we are, truly, his *body* in the world. This is what it means to be the Church. And just as Jesus acted in the world through his body during his earthly ministry, he acts now through his body the church – at least insofar as we let him. I'm not forgetting our solid track record of failure. But if each of us is transfigured by the Eucharist, we are, first, together the same Christ, we are united with each other, *one* in a real sense (ontologically indeed), and we are, second, (and this is so beautiful!) collectively and individually Christ's hands and feet, his outstretched arms of love.

There is so much to be said here about how we can live as transfigured beings, which is to say to live Eucharistically. The key I suppose is in *what the Eucharist is*; meditating on that we can see what needs to be replicated in our lives. But let's stick with the transfiguration and see (briefly) what it teaches us. It is remarkable.

On the mountain Jesus was seen talking with Moses and Elijah. The *context* is of Jesus' death and resurrection. The transfiguration is a hinge moment in Matthew's Gospel immediately following the revelation of Jesus at Caesarea Philippi as the Messiah, which is immediately defined as how Jesus must undergo great suffering, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. This is then expanded upon by the application of the same pattern in the lives of those who wish to follow Jesus. 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it' (Matt. 17:24).

This context is foregrounded and emphasized by the presence of Moses and Elijah. They personify the Law and the Prophets, summed up and completed by Jesus who comes after these two great figures. Now the Law, properly

understood, is not a list of outworn taboos and precepts, as we Christians sometimes caricature it, but the living link between the People of the Covenant and their God, disclosing the wonders of God's will. It is this living and lively contact with God that is summed up in Jesus in his New Covenant. But how does he do it? In his own person. And his own person is shown in all its reality in the paschal mystery. Here Jesus, whose name means 'Yahweh saves', is truly Saviour, is truly himself. What he teaches us, his Law so to speak, is seen, displayed, nailed to the cross. We must live likewise, losing our lives to find them. As Jesus tells us 'Love one another as I have loved you' (John 13:34 & 15:12).

The Prophets come to our aid in showing us how. For the prophet, inspired by the Spirit, speaks the words of God. We, inspired by the same Spirit, can speak the Word of God, Jesus, in our lives. I would be surprised if, among us gathered here, the experience of inner promptings to do what is right is not common. No doubt we are also good at ignoring them. Yet the Spirit speaks in our hearts. The intelligent thing to do is to silence the other voices, the rumours of unbridled self-confidence, the pricks of anger, the stabs of jealousy, the seductions of passion, all the cacophony of our self-centred egos, so we can hear his gentle voice, privilege it above every other, and follow it. It is the path to joy and to lasting peace.

Led by Moses and Elijah we can live transfigured lives, be the body of Christ. What awaits us, if we do so, is beyond our wildest hopes.

*The Revd Dr Callan Slipper
National Ecumenical Officer for the Church of England
Church House, Westminster*