

Sermon for the Sunday next before Lent (B) – 15.2.15

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Lectionary Texts:

2 Kings 2:1-12

Psalm 50:1-6

2 Corinthians 4:3-6

Mark 9:2-9

“For it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness’, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” (2 Corinthians 4:6)

- A couple of years ago I was intrigued to learn that, in the Jewish tradition, there are certain passages and texts that you’re not allowed to read until you reach a certain age.
- There’s a sort of ‘parental control’ in relation to them - a bit like the way films are classified or rated: ‘Universal’ (any age)– or ‘PG’ (parental guidance required) ‘12A’ (over 12s) or ‘18’ (adults only). That’s the film version.
- In Judaism, there aren’t *many* scripture passages that are ‘restricted’ –and the ones that *are*, are not so much because of the amount of sex or violence in them (in fact, there are an awful lot of pretty dire bits that are *unrestricted* when you think about it) - but because they are *so intense and powerful and deeply mysterious*. They might be too overwhelming if we’re not ready for them.
- Today’s readings feel very ‘adult’ in that sense.
- But whereas as a teenager, when the group challenge was always to ‘know better’ and break the rules by trying to get into a film you weren’t old enough for, today’s readings make me feel the opposite. Even now (in my mid-50s), I’m not sure I feel old or mature enough to really engage with them – let alone understand them.
- I feel in good company with all those (like Moses and Jeremiah for starters) over the years who’ve tried to say, “Lord, who am *I* to go or speak for you? You can’t possibly expect me to do *that!* I’m

only *a child*....” Why couldn’t it have been *Geoffrey* preaching today....

- But as well as a definite sense of awe and trepidation, there’s a ‘Wow!’ about today’s readings, too, isn’t there? A sense of challenge, exhilaration and excitement.
- So I wonder what their *invitation* to us is?
- In the Old Testament reading, it’s the story of Elijah and Elisha. Elisha’s already been appointed as Elijah’s successor for some time, but now he realises the moment is coming when he’s finally going to have to let go of him.
- It’s beautifully tender and generous moment, isn’t it, when Elijah turns to Elisha and asks, ‘Tell me, what I can do for you before I’m taken from you?’ It liberates Elisha to express his longing and need: ‘Give me a double portion of your spirit to help me....’ I expect those of you who’ve had to face letting go of those you most love and look up to when they die can resonate with that...
- And Elijah says yes, but with one condition: ‘that you *see* me as I’m being taken from you...’
- It’s a strange condition isn’t it?
- But perhaps not that different from the story of Jesus’ transfiguration. Here, rather than Elisha, it’s Peter, James and John.
- And in contrast to Elisha, who at each stage has to resist those who try to put him off going with Elijah to the end (“Don’t you realise that he’s going to be taken away from you?! Stay here!”) – here it’s *Jesus* who takes the initiative, taking the three disciples up the mountain.
- In Luke’s version it says it’s a really hard place for them to stay awake... they’re ‘weighed down with sleep’ – something so dense and mysterious is going on, it’s hard to stay with it and open to it.
- Yet in contrast to Gethsemane, they somehow manage to: and, like Elisha, because they’re able to *keep* looking and because they’ve spent so much time with Jesus, they see something of Gods’ glory

and are *dazzled*.... Having the loving face of Jesus in their hearts opens their eyes to *see*.

- I wonder if you've ever glimpsed the sheer abundance and weight of God's glory?
- It seems that those moments happen especially through those places and experiences we'd *least* have chosen to go: 'desert' places and times. Places that somehow refine and purify us as we learn that the only thing we *can* do is *keep trusting* God and holding on to God's promises even when things don't seem to make any sense and there don't seem to be any answers or easy ways out. The only way is *through*...in the presence of the One who says "I'll be with you."
- The transfiguration scene follows on directly from Caesarea Philippi, when Jesus has told his disciples that way of glory and resurrection is going to be through suffering and death. It's not what they wanted or expected of the Messiah, but Peter's given short sharp shrift when he voices it. Jesus says this *is* going to be the way. That's how we learn that we have absolutely *nothing* to fear.
- One of the most beautiful and unexpected gifts in my work at the hospital has been being able to accompany people in their dying – and to see their faces filled with peace and light as they're gradually brought home to the God they trust and long for.
- Life can be very hard, sometimes... But God doesn't expect us to be able to do it in our own strength.... He promises that *his* grace and strength will be sufficient: he *will* give us what we need – even when it seems unbearable.
- Paul's writing out of exactly that sense of fragility and poverty...his authority and leadership is being challenged again and again by the Corinthians. Yet he dares to trust that God's glory will be revealed if he stays true to him: *somehow* God will open people's eyes to the truth.
- Elijah and Moses each had a tough time and felt completely inadequate for the task too.

- Yet these were (and are) the sorts of people God chose and *still* chooses. People who *don't* have it 'all sorted'; people who simply spend time with God and are open to God and God's ways.
- A few weeks ago, I preached about the new language we're given and become part when we're baptised in the Holy Spirit – and how the Spirit in us draws us deeper into the language of love and intimacy between Jesus and his Father. Deeper into relationship with the God who says, '*Tell me what's going on for you... Let's talk together...*'
- Today, as we hear those same words, "This is my beloved Son, listen to him!" there's even more.... We're drawn into a conversation not only with Jesus and his Father, but the whole of the drama of Scripture (Moses and Elijah representing the Law and the Prophets) too... In order to glimpse the fullness of God's life and beauty, we need to spend time getting to know them ,too!
- We're part of something *so much bigger!* Another glimpse of God's glory...
- Yesterday I went to the Memorial Service of Stephen Sykes. He'd been a significant figure for many people (as father and grandfather, as friend, as thinker, writer and teacher, as pastor and Bishop of this Diocese for some years) and as with every funeral or Memorial service, we learned all sorts of new 'hidden', unexpected dimensions of him and his life.
- As we sat and celebrated Stephen and all he gave and was to so many people in so many ways, I was also suddenly aware of how fleeting and 'little' his life was (and all our lives are) in the bigger scheme of things: what a relatively *small* part we can play.
- That's why we need to take it up and live it as fully as we can while we can – to take *our* part in the story – to take up the baton and carry it on when others have to let go and pass it on. What an awesome responsibility and privilege. We can't *possibly* do it on our own: we all need others to inspire and encourage and believe in us.
- At the service yesterday, one person gave thanks especially for Stephen's 'ambition' for those he loved and taught: for the

imagination and vision he had for others and for prompting them into it.

- God's drama is so big he needs us all to find and take up our parts in it. That's what living as his body and fulfilling his purposes for us and for the whole world is about: we need to grow up into our full stature in him. It's the most meaningful, satisfying thing we can do. Whatever our 'day jobs' or occupations are, that's the *deeper* calling to each of us as part of his body.
- The Holy Spirit in us is God's "Yes!" in us to what God's calling us into. And he gives us more than a double portion. He gives us as much as we are open to receiving.
- Instead of "Lord, how can you expect me to do x/y/z (lead the prayers, be a preacher, warden, server – or whatever your particular dread is)– I'm not old or wise or experienced or confident enough...." The Holy Spirit is *ambitious* for us. Not in the sense of achieving status or success in the world's eyes, but in *God's* eyes: the glory of *his* image and reflection in us. He whispers "Maybe you *could*..." (and then) "Maybe you *can*..!" In fact, you wouldn't imagine who you *can* be in me!" Let me be *bigger*!
- Sometimes you see people who are so fully *alive* in God that their faces simply *shine*, don't you? It's *wonderful*!
- God wants us to be *radiant* as his body: full of love, life, peace, joy and fulfilment – all the gifts and fruits of his Spirit – his glory in us: *together*. The more we seek Jesus' face, the more we'll see of his love for one another: the more we'll see the *light* of his love.
- At the PCC Away-Day last week, someone spoke of how he'd simply gradually got more and more 'drawn in to things' in St James over the years. It started with the little things and then just gradually grew, until he found he was doing things he'd never dreamt he could or would have. And the really beautiful, surprising thing to him was discovering that far more than it being about him simply 'doing' and 'taking on' things was that *he* was blessed massively through doing them. That's the thing about offering ourselves to God's 'service' – it's about 'finding' our lives after we've 'let go' of them and offered them to him. That's what

today's psalm is about. Why should we be so surprised?! God wants to *bless* us!

- Just think of all the potential and blessing that's still to be discovered and fulfilled among us here!
- So as we begin to prepare for Lent and to go deeper into Jesus' passion, death and resurrection at Easter, let's open ourselves to receiving more and more of his Spirit in us and give thanks and praise to God for his glory as we pray in the words of Psalm 27:
- 'Hear O Lord, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me! "Come," my heart says, "Seek his face! Your face, Lord, do I seek. Do not hide your face from me." **Amen.**

Lectionary Texts:

2 Kings 2:1-12

Psalm 50:1-6

2 Corinthians 4:3-6

Mark 9:2-9

2 Kings 2:1-12 ‘Elijah Ascends to Heaven’

Now when the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. ²Elijah said to Elisha, ‘Stay here; for the LORD has sent me as far as Bethel.’ But Elisha said, ‘As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.’ So they went down to Bethel. ³The company of prophets who were in Bethel came out to Elisha, and said to him, ‘Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?’ And he said, ‘Yes, I know; keep silent.’

⁴Elijah said to him, ‘Elisha, stay here; for the LORD has sent me to Jericho.’ But he said, ‘As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.’ So they came to Jericho. ⁵The company of prophets who were at Jericho drew near to Elisha, and said to him, ‘Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?’ And he answered, ‘Yes, I know; be silent.’

⁶Then Elijah said to him, ‘Stay here; for the LORD has sent me to the Jordan.’ But he said, ‘As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.’ So the two of them went on. ⁷Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. ⁸Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground.

⁹When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, ‘Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you.’ Elisha said, ‘Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit.’ ¹⁰He responded, ‘You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not.’ ¹¹As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. ¹²Elisha kept watching and crying out,

‘Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!’ But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.

Psalm 50 ‘The Acceptable Sacrifice’

- ¹ The mighty one, God the LORD,
speaks and summons the earth
from the rising of the sun to its setting.
- ² Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty,
God shines forth.
- ³ Our God comes and does not keep silence,
before him is a devouring fire,
and a mighty tempest all around him.
- ⁴ He calls to the heavens above
and to the earth, that he may judge his people:
- ⁵ ‘Gather to me my faithful ones,
who made a covenant with me by sacrifice!’
- ⁶ The heavens declare his righteousness,
for God himself is judge.

2 Corinthians 4:1-6 ‘Treasure in Clay Jars’

Therefore, since it is by God’s mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. ²We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practise cunning or to falsify God’s word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God. ³And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ⁴In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. ⁵For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus’ sake. ⁶For it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness’, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Mark 9:2-9 ‘The Transfiguration’

² Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, ³and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on

earth could bleach them. ⁴And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. ⁵Then Peter said to Jesus, ‘Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.’ ⁶He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!’ ⁸Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

9 As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.