**Sunday next before Lent, 26 February 2017**

**Readings**

Exodus 24. 12-emd

Matthew 17. 1-9

The Bible is the key text of Christianity; the book on which our faith is based. Before there were prayer books, there was the Bible. The Earliest Church used the Jewish Bible, in particular the Psalms in their worship. We hear the Bible read in Church in a week-by-week, when we come together on a Sunday to worship God. It’s a familiar text, so why is it then that it can sometimes feel remote or strange.

Today’s Gospel reading is perhaps the one that can feel the most remote and the most strange to our ears. In today’s Gospel reading Jesus takes his friends, goes up on to a mountain top, and is there transfigured before them. His clothes shine with a heavenly light, and he is met by Moses and Elijah, the two greatest prophets of Israel. What you may wonder, has this to do with us, here in 21st Century Addington?

There are two reasons why today’s reading is not as alien as it might first look. The first is the location of the reading. Today is the Sunday next before Lent; the last Sunday before Ash Wednesday. Just as we are about to enter the long fast of Lent, we are given a vision of Easter. The light that transfigures Jesus is a foretaste of the light of the resurrection. It’s quite literally a light at the end of the tunnel! We are being reminded of why we have the great fast of Lent. Of what we are looking forward to, of what we are preparing ourselves for.

The image that the Transfiguration is also one that precedes (and mirrors) that of Good Friday. Today Jesus’s glory is revealed, and he is flanked by Moses and Elijah, Israel’s two greatest prophets. On Good Friday Jesus’s majesty is again revealed, this time through the horror and darkness of the cross, on which Jesus is enthroned. Here Jesus is flanked not by prophets, but by two thieves. Yet even in this darkest moment, one of these speaks prophetically, when he acknowledges Christ’s innocence. I would like to explore this further with you, but today is not the day on which to do so.

But this explanation can seem prosaic, and somewhat boring when compared to the way I want us to understand the Transfiguration this morning. You see the light that transfigures Jesus doesn’t come from outside of him. It’s not as though a heavenly spot light has picked him out on the mountain. No, the light that transfigures come from within Jesus.

And this light isn’t unique to Jesus; as today’s Old Testament reading shows us, Transfiguration happens when people encounter God. Just after the end of today’s Old Testament reading, Moses comes down from the mountain, having met with God. He has been transfigured, and his face glows with the glory of God, so much so that he has to keep his face covered because it alarms and terrifies his fellow countrymen. The light that transfigures Jesus is not separate to us, but is a light that is within each of us; it is the light of God that dwells within us. It’s a light that shines forth from our encounter with God.

When I think about the meaning of the Transfiguration, I am reminded of what one of the great Fathers of the Church, St. Athanasius, has to say to say about Jesus being born as a human: ‘God becomes human, so that we might become divine’. God became human in Jesus, so that humans might be transfigured, just as Jesus was, that they might be as God created them to be. God became human in Jesus, was born as a human baby, so we might become as he is.

Just as Moses was transformed by his encounter with God, so are we too transformed by our encounter with God. We may not see it in ourselves, but we see it in one another. We are transformed and transfigured as we pray, and when we meet together in worship, as we share Communion together, and finally as we receive God’s blessing. These are all moments of transfiguration, moments of transformation.

You may think I’m nuts saying this. You don’t see people walking around the Whitgift Centre with faces and clothes glowing! Of course not. But as I said, people are transfigured by their encounter with God. With some people that transformation is obvious. You see it in men and women of prayer, people like Archbishop Desmond Tutu, or my friend from University, Clive, a Pastor at an Evangelical Church. There is something changed, something different about them. They had, through their lives of prayer and time spent with God, been transfigured, and it shows in their lives and in their very being. To spend time with Clive was like spending time with someone who had been transfigured; there was something special about him. (If you get the chance, watch a video of Desmond Tutu and you’ll see what I mean, there’s something changed, transformed about him – that’s what I mean when I say that he’s been transfigured through his time spent with God.)

So the Transfiguration isn’t so separate, so alien from us, as you might think, or as I suggested at the beginning of the sermon. But how can we to follow in the footsteps of Moses and of Desmond Tutu? Well Lent is a good time to start following in their footsteps; a wise man once told me that 40 days is about the right amount of time to form habits, good or bad.

Were only a few days away from Ash Wednesday, and the start of Lent, and I have this challenge for you. This Lent, rather than trying to give up things like chocolate, crisps or alcohol, do something different, commit yourself to something new. Whether it’s spending some time in daily prayer, or reading the Bible (or another holy book) – there are plenty out there. But also to try and live lives that, with God’s grace, transfigure and transform the world around us: of caring for others, helping people in need, spending time with a lonely neighbour. And in doing these things, also allowing ourselves to be transfigured and transformed by God.