

## The Sunday before Lent, Year C

Sunday 27 February 2022

At some point this afternoon after lunch, midway through a book or an easy tv programme, many of us will find ourselves napping. Somewhere between a snooze and a rest, eyes closing then opening. The gentle resting of the in-between state between sleep and being awake. It is, on the whole a lovely feeling and one which I can enjoy safely as long as I have set an alarm to wake me in good time before evensong. It can be very comforting to feel the afternoon snooze coming on.

But tiredness isn't always a good feeling – if we are busy, if we are exhausted and shattered, we can fall asleep at the worst of times, then wake up startled, panicking, and unsure of where we are. Managing our sleep and rest is vital to our busy lives. I am yet to meet anybody who has got this sussed. Many people suffer from sleepless nights and tired days. Such a lack of good rest can play havoc with our ability to function.

So we praise rest for the body, and we praise rest for the mind. But there must always be a constant guard that we do not let rest take over and turn into laziness, idleness, or indifference. In the gospels Jesus warns against such lack of attention. Way back at the start of the Church's year we heard on Advent Sunday Jesus' words, '*be alert at all times*'. Keep awake, watch, wait, be attentive. It may be ok – and indeed it is good for us – to rest our body and our mind, but spiritually we must not let ourselves slumber so much as to turn off from God's call on our lives. As we look towards Lent we do well to call ourselves back to alertness and awaken our souls.

After a busy few days Peter and John and James find themselves scaling a mountain with Jesus. Tired and exhausted they are unprepared for what is about to happen. Before their eyes – if only their eyes were open – Jesus is transfigured as he prays. The gospel this morning tells us that they were weighed down with sleep. Different translations suggest that they were either fully asleep, half-asleep, or just shattered. We get the impression that they were in that half-state and not as attentive or prepared as they might have been. We see the same sleepy behaviour again in the Garden of Gethsemane. There too Jesus is praying but the disciples are weighed down with sleep.

But the event of the transfiguration is enough to rouse them out of sleep and so they are able to see the glory of Christ revealed as God's chosen accompanied by Moses and Elijah. What they see, what they experience, and what they understand is enough to energise them quickly into action: Peter, as is his way, becomes so excited as to want to capture the moment. He wants to possess the moment, like some spiritual selfie.

But as we all know, the disciples must descend that mountain and return to their work, their homes, their families. They must take that moment of glory and capture that energy in order to face what awaits them: in this case they know that the Jesus who they have seen in glory will 'undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised'. It is the glory which Peter wants to capture which will become their strength for the trials which lie ahead.

The transfiguration is preached on this Sunday before Lent in order to strengthen us for the renewing weeks of penitence, self-denial, and spiritual discipline which lie ahead, strengthening us as we journey towards the passion of our Lord. But this year we face not just a spiritual desert but a very real, worldly desert, a world which is once again reminded of its vulnerability in the face of war in Ukraine. A world fearful and threatened by the power-hungry actions of a regime intent on violence. As our archbishops put in their pastoral letter this week, 'an act of evil, imperilling as it does the relative peace and security that Europe has enjoyed for so long'.

The revelations of this past week - not just the attack on Ukraine, but the shattering of long-held agreements about peace, security, international diplomacy and decency - these revelations have shaken us out of slumber, awakening within us feelings which are at once resolutely turned to peace, but also reminders of the fragility of our existence.

We are here at worship and about to behold the glory of Christ present in the sacrament of the eucharist, but we shall descend this mountain in order to live our lives. How can we be strengthened to take the glory of this moment and reflect it in our lives tomorrow and through the coming week?

The disciples are awakened by the transfiguration event, a momentous experience which draws them to awe and worship. Like so many momentous

events in Jesus' life it is founded in prayer – Jesus went up the mountain to pray and while he was praying the appearance of his face changed. Prayer changes us and the discipline of prayer trains us to be like Jesus.

The very purpose of prayer is that we become aware of the presence of Christ within us, we see as he sees, listen as he listens, speak as he speaks, act as he acts. It is the ultimate awakening of our soul to be drawn closer into the life of Jesus.

In the wake of these past few days and the invasion of Ukraine the archbishops of Canterbury and York have called for this Sunday to be a day of prayer for peace. It is our primary response to the situation – and as we feel otherwise helpless it might be our only course of action at the moment. The bishop of Leeds wrote this week:

*we can join with those in Ukraine itself in praying with and for those standing alone in fear and suffering an indescribable fate. I am not stupid: some people will describe prayer as pointless wordiness that achieves nothing. Well, prayer is not just about bringing our fears and hopes and dreads and concerns to God, but it is also about learning to look through the eyes of God who loves justice, condemns lying and misrepresentation, and abhors the violence of the powerful. Prayer changes us before it changes anything else. Common prayer shuts us up, opens us up, reframes our priorities and calls us to a practical solidarity with those who suffer.*

Alongside this day of prayer for peace the archbishops are also calling us, together with Pope Francis and Christians across the world, to keep our Ash Wednesday fast with a particular passion for peace. Prayer and fasting are two focal points of any Lenten discipline and this year we shall face both with an awakened sense of how they draw us closer to Christ whose suffering, passion, and death is the saving power of all humanity.

On this Sunday before Lent we hear of Jesus praying before the transfiguration, and his face was changed. The disciples witness this glory. Just as when Moses came down from Mount Sinai with his face shining as he had been talking with God, and Aaron and all the Israelites see Moses' face shining with God's glory.

So when we speak to God, when we pray, we also change. We reflect the glory of God. As today's collect puts it, *'give us grace to perceive his glory, that we*

*may be strengthened to suffer with him and be changed into his likeness, from glory to glory’.*

It might seem too much of a contrast with current world events to speak of glory, but in our collect and our readings today we see the glory of God in such a way that we might attain it. And prayer – placing ourselves in the presence of God, becoming as Jesus would have us be, is a process of glorification – a process whereby we are cleansed and purified, prepared, strengthened and united with God, that nothing in the world can overpower the love of Christ crucified, risen and ascended.

Lent is upon us and we are called refresh, renew, and awaken. Let us ensure that our anger, horror, and fears of the past few days are channelled through prayer to proclaim Christ to the world. We look to the Cross, not with fear but with confidence that Christ has overcome evil. The transfiguration shows us that glory is within our reach. Now is the time for us to pray.

*That it may please thee to succour, help, and comfort all that are in danger, necessity, and tribulation,  
**We beseech thee to hear us, good Lord.***

Stephen Edwards