

The Sunday Next Before Lent (Quinquagesima)
St Mary the Virgin, St Briavels, and St Mary Magdalene,
Hewelsfield, 2023

Exodus 24: 12-18
Matthew 17:1-9

One of the great rituals of this Sunday, the Sunday before Lent begins, in some quite ritualistic churches is a rather wonderful tradition called the 'burial of the alleluia'. If you want to see some churches doing this in all of its splendour just Google 'burial of the alleluia'. It's quite a fun thing to do if you are in a church with lots of children, where you take a scroll or big piece of timber with 'Alleluia!' written or carved on it in beautiful letters, and in some cases physically wrap it up and bury it in the churchyard, or hide it under the altar. The idea is that during the 40 days of Lent traditionally we don't say 'alleluia', because we are saving that for the great Day of Resurrection at Easter. And then on Easter Day you can get the children to go back out into the graveyard and dig up the alleluia, and put it in pride of place somewhere. *Ad lib with our Alleluia*

Some churches are more rigorous than others about avoiding the use of the word alleluia during Lent. When I was a vicar and used to choose the hymns for every service I used quite often do pretty well until about the third or fourth Sunday of Lent, where I would have chosen something that had an 'alleluia' hidden somewhere in line four of verse five, and I would see it coming towards me as we were singing, with a kind of sinking feeling in my heart!

But the point is that we are moving this week into the next season of the Church's year. The season of Lent begins on Wednesday, and then stretches all the way to Easter, actually 46

days later. And I think I'm back with you about halfway through to see how you're getting on! And it is a season of penitence, in which we give up some of the familiar joyful elements of our worship, like the *Gloria*, or the alleluia, to prepare ourselves for the joyful moment of Easter. And there are three opportunities to go to church on Ash Wednesday in our group of parishes, which is a jolly good way to begin this season.

And just before we dive into this really important season of reflection, of a kind of spiritual MOT, when traditionally we have a little look at our prayer life, our Bible reading, how and when we give to charity, how and why we show our love to our community, to our world, we get these lovely readings which are here to lift up our hearts to remind us where we are going.

I absolutely love the story of the Transfiguration. It's my favourite feast day actually, and although it's quite sad I contrived to propose to Emma on Transfiguration Day 21 years ago! The Transfiguration is all about getting a glimpse of the reality. Seeing, just for a moment, the fullness of the person and nature of Jesus Christ. And what's really interesting is that this event, in St Matthew's Gospel, takes place immediately after Jesus has told the crowd that anyone who wants to be his disciple must take up the cross and follow him. So reading this story at this time of the year is really appropriate because that's pretty much where it fits in the story of the gospel. Jesus presents people with this quite stark statement, that following him is going to be like carrying the means of your own execution on your back. That's pretty serious stuff. If you want to be my disciple it is going to cost you. It's going to require you to be ready to die. If not physically just yet - though of course for many of the early Christians it really did mean martyrdom, and it still does for some of our brothers and sisters in the world - but if not physically then there is going to need to be a death to

the old way of life, in order to rise as the new man or woman. This way of life is not cheap. And of course if you do go to church on Wednesday you will experience that very stark, physical symbol of the ash. We begin Lent by receiving on our foreheads dust and ashes, as a reminder that this way of life requires a death of the old man before there can be a resurrection of the new man. 'Remember that you are dust, and to dust you will return.'

So just before that, we get this glimpse through the curtain almost as an encouragement, as if Christ is watching us run the race, and he's manning the water stand, and as we go past he's shouting out to us, the finish line is just round the corner and it's amazing. Peter and James and John go up the mountain with Christ, and for an instant they see the entirety of his nature. They see the reality. And it is dazzling. It is glorious. It is awesome.

It is a little flash of Easter, before the journey of Lent begins. Don't forget that at this point in Scripture Jesus is turning his face towards Jerusalem. And for these three men this is a promise, the foretaste, of the fact that even though everything that is about to happen is going to look like complete disaster, even though it is going to look like the failure of Jesus' ministry, and the destruction of what they had all worked for, appearance is not the same as reality.

St Thomas Aquinas wrote a hymn that doesn't get sung very much anymore, partly because the original is in Latin, but that contains the lines:

O Christ who now beneath a veil we see,
may what we thirst for soon our portion be,
to gaze on thee unveiled and seek thy face,
the vision of thy glory and thy grace.

In some churches there is a tradition of veiling pictures and crosses during Lent, or part of Lent; we don't do that here I don't think, but you may have come across it, particularly if you have been on holiday on the continent during Lent. And that is of course done so that they can then be unveiled at Easter, when we celebrate the reality of who Jesus really is.

And actually think about it, all the way through our worship we talk about the apparent gap between what we can see what is really there. Think about a baptism. It looks like the baby, or the adult, it is having a rather unpleasant and rather public bath. But of course what's actually happening is a rebirth, what Jesus refers to in the story about Nicodemus is being 'born again'.

Or think about what we are about to do. You will come up to the altar in a few minutes time and it will look and feel and taste as if you are eating a piece of bread and maybe drinking a sip of wine. But what the church tells us is that there is much more reality behind that appearance. We don't know exactly how it works, and we may disagree with each other about precisely what happens on the altar, but in some spiritual, sacramental way, you are receiving the reality of the presence of Christ. There is much more behind the veil.

And that is the nature of our faith. There is so far that we can see, and the rest is mystery. We say that exact thing on most Sundays don't we: Great is the mystery of faith.

So a wonderful glimpse of glory, before we head into Lent, reminding us that the glory is always there. Which we must remember, in the dark and the wilderness, and the days when our faith feels like ashes rather than light. We only need to lift the corner of the veil, and there is glory everywhere. Amen.