

The Sunday Next Before Lent

St Thomas, Salisbury, 2024

2 Kings 2:1-12

2 Corinthians 4:3-6

Mark 9:2-9

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

‘As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two men, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. Elisha kept watching and crying out, ‘My father, my father! The chariots of Israel and their horsemen!’

It’s actually one of my very favourite passages of Scripture. I find that cry of Elisha, as he witnesses this extraordinary event, his mentor, his master being taken up into heaven by a supernatural flaming chariot, quite moving. My father! My father! The chariots of Israel and their horsemen. For a second the veil between this world and the next is not only twitched back, it’s like opening a massive pair of heavy curtains in a big bay window, and the light just comes pouring in. Quite extraordinary.

It’s one only two accounts in Scripture of a human being being ‘assumed’, being taken up into heaven without dying. The other one is Enoch in Genesis. Catholics use this text as one of the arguments for the assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary of course. If Enoch and Elijah, why not Mar?. Others might respond and say, yeah well you can’t really use Scripture like that my friend! I’ll just leave that with you to ponder.

Wednesday is Ash Wednesday. The beginning of the great Lenten fast. We will strip our church of flowers, we will don the penitential purple, and we will ponder our mortality, our fragility. And as I said at Evensong last week, Holy Mother Church is a great psychologist, and so today, on the last Sunday before Lent, we are given this wonderful vision of the reality of the economy of heaven and earth. The reality of the relationship between what we can *see* and what is *real*.

It is going to get dark for six weeks or so. Increasingly so, leading us to the bleakness and the starkness of Good Friday, and we signal that quite physically on Wednesday when we receive the symbol of our mortality onto our foreheads in ash. ‘Remember that you are dust’, we will hear. And it’s a message we need to hear every year. But we also need today. Because what today reminds us is that we don’t put ourselves through the disciplines of Lent as some sort of act of bizarre corporate self sabotage. We enter Lent knowing that we are pointing at Easter. And that every day of Lent, as we ponder our weakness, and through fasting, prayer, and acts of service try to *reform* ourselves, we are reforming ourselves in the likeness of the One who doesn’t just pull the curtains back a bit, but, on Good Friday, as we remember from Scripture, tears the curtain in two.

So we get a flash of glory today. The ascension of Elijah, that glimpse of the divine chariot. And then the Transfiguration, whose proper feast is of course on 6 August, where Peter, James and John, just for a moment, see the curtain pulled back on the person of Jesus, and they see what has always been the case, but that is usually hidden from sight - that Jesus is not only fully human, but that he is fully, extraordinarily, and dazzlingly divine. And Elijah, who ascended so many hundred years earlier, is there with him and Moses. It becomes, in the words of our offertory hymn, a ‘touching place’.

And it makes me think a bit about the place of personal experience in our Christian journey. You hear extraordinary stories of people who have ‘Damascus road’ experiences. People who *do* see visions, who *do* see angels, who meet God face-to-face. There may be some of those stories here in Church this morning, or participating remotely from home. Some people *do* see God. Perhaps you have? It’s not been my experience, by and large.

And the church has, periodically, felt quite uncomfortable and not really known what to do about personal experiences like that. You know that wonderful Charles Wesley hymn, ‘And can it be that I should gain an interest in the Saviour’s blood’? It’s actually got lots more verses in it than appear in most hymn books, and one of the ones that the Methodist Church cut out really early on, they cut out because it was too personal. They felt uncomfortable. Two of the lines in that missing verse read, “I feel the life his wounds impart; I feel my Saviour in my heart.” It’s worth knowing that. Charles Wesley, whose texts are such wonderful densely referenced scriptural images, he also felt his Saviour in his heart. And he wanted to say that too. My father, my father! The chariots of Israel and their horsemen!

There’s a rich tradition in church worship of trying to balance personal experience against, if you like, theology and doctrine. So the Benedictine monk Thomas Aquinas wrote, ‘O Christ who now beneath a veil we see, may what we thirst for soon our portion be, to gaze on thee *unveiled*, and see thy face.’ Or Walter Smith in ‘Immortal, invisible’: ‘O help us to see ‘tis only the splendour of light hideth thee.’

What I think is really important to remember, perhaps particularly for those of us who don’t have profound experiences of God in quite the same way Elisha, or as Charles Wesley

seemed to, is that that’s okay. Most of us are not going to be assumed into heaven like Elijah, or Enoch,... Or maybe Our Lady.

But although our experience might be different, the reality is not. The chariots of Israel and their horsemen are galloping around all of us. At the Sanctus this church will be filled with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven, and Christ is sitting next to you right now. Christ is holding your hand right now. As Michael Hewitt wrote in one of the most lovely Maundy Thursday hymns, sadly not often sung, ‘we know you are near us, though just out of sight.’

The work of the Christian, the work of you and me, and us as a congregation and a church family, is to keep believing that, and to keep living as if God is near us, though just out of sight, as if it were true, and slowly, slowly, be formed into the image of Christ by our worship, our fellowship, our prayer, our penitence. To make the final verse of our opening hymn, also written by Charles Wesley by the way, a prayer that we really mean: ‘fill me, radiance divine, scatter all my unbelief; more and more thy self display, shining to the perfect day.’

The disciples needed to know that the promise was true, before Christ set his face towards Jerusalem. And of course even then, having had this extraordinary experience, they all run away anyway on Maundy Thursday night. That doesn’t make what they saw untrue, it just makes them human.

And in the darkest days of our own journeys we can feel a very long way away from the mountaintop, or from the chariots of Israel and their horsemen. That is also why we do this journey together. I think I’ve probably said to you before, there are a very few Christians who can make it as hermits. But I’m not one

of them, and probably most of you aren't either. I need you. We need each other. We need fellowship. We journey as a family, so that when we can't see the chariots, when we can't feel our Saviour in our heart, hopefully somebody else can.

But the veil is thin, my friends. And there is glory just below the surface. It looks like bread: it is God. It looks like wine: it is God. And yes, we are but dust, and to dust we shall return, but we are dust that is loved by God. Dust that is millimetres away from the reality of the glory. Dust that is destined for Easter.

My father! My father! The chariots of Israel and their horsemen!

Amen.