

Sermon Lent 2 Year C 2019

Human beings are meaning-making creatures. It is one of the things that separates us from the animals - our ability to give meaning to our lives. Of course, this is a large part of the work of religion: to help give us a framework in which we can interpret our lives and give them meaning. And while I believe science and religion can (and indeed should) have a constructive and happy conversation with each other, they do diverge around the issue of meaning. Science can provide us facts and theories and a disciplined method in which ideas are tested. It asks questions, but *not* questions of ultimate meaning. But it is the task of the world's great religions to give lives meaning, to address the questions of meaning: *who I am, where do I belong to, what is my identity, what gives my life meaning?*

In the 5th book of the Chronicles of Narnia by C.S. Lewis - the *Voyage of the Dawn Treader* - 3 children from our world find themselves in the magical world of Narnia and join in an epic voyage. The journey takes them to the end of the world and to an enchanted island. On this island they encounter a very old man, who reveals himself as a 'star at rest', waiting to become young again, so he can once more take his place in the heavens. The ever-pragmatic Eustace - reflecting something of the reductionist mind-set so common today - says that in our world a star is a 'huge ball of flaming gas'. To this the old man replies, 'even in your world my son, that is not what a star *is*, only what it is made of.' This is an extraordinary insight and reveals a great truth. It reminds us that even if we are made of carbon, water, mercury and whatever else we are also so much more.... We are not simply the sum of our parts. There is always more to us.

In the Gospel placed before us today we hear of the Transfiguration – that moment when Peter, James and John glimpsed Jesus' glory; when Jesus ascends the mountain; when the thin veil between time and eternity for a moment draws back, and Jesus' glory shines out. And while we may suppose that Peter, James and John had come to a fairly good idea about who Jesus is and what he was on about, they now see that *he* is something much, much more.

But in showing how much more *he is*, Christ is also showing us how much more *we* can be. Saint Paul has no doubts about it, as we hear in the epistle reading today: *from heaven comes the saviour we are waiting for, the Lord Jesus Christ, and he will transfigure these wretched bodies of ours into copies of his glorious body.* In other words, what Christ reveals on the mountain will be ours in hope. Christ reveals himself as the Glorified One to show us that *we too* can share in his glory.

C. S. Lewis was also much more than the author of children's books. He became one of the most accessible and popular exponents of the Christian faith in the 20th Century. He too understood the potential (and perhaps the surprising) glory that lay behind every person. *"It is a serious thing,"* wrote Lewis, *"to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities ... that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no 'ordinary' people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilisations - these are mortal... But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub and exploit - immortal horrors or everlasting splendours."*

Lewis here really puts his finger on a critical issue. We are - all of us - much more than we appear. Faith cannot just about warm 'fuzzies', simply offering us gentle reassurances. It demands that we ask the hard question: how do we avoid becoming an everlasting horror? How might we become an everlasting splendour? Lewis is right to note, of course, that if we are capable, through God's grace, for glory, then we are also, through sin, capable of grave evil. The horrors that unfolded in New Zealand on Friday surely reminds us of that. Neither alternative can be taken lightly. And so, the scriptures today suggest two important ways we might realise that hope for glory. The first is by reminding ourselves that we are a covenant *people*.

In the first reading today, we hear of God establishing his covenant with Abram. But this was not just a binding promise God makes with one man. It is for all his descendants. God's covenant promise brings us into relation with others. It is not a life that is enjoyed privately and individually. It always has *communal dimensions*. It is only through the church that the sacraments are mediated to us. Only through the church that the Scriptures are interpreted to us. Only in the church the apostolic faith is received. And in the covenanted life of the church we are called to see each other, as Lewis reminds us, from the perspective of eternity. That is what will change the world! When we see that in our neighbour, in our brothers and sisters, in the person sitting beside you a vessel through which God's glory can shine though.

That is the first step, but there is something else. A second (and related) step, something we have to face about ourselves: no matter how hard we try, we fall short. We each have a potential for truth, goodness, beauty, but we fail. We need outside help. And that's why in part we gather as Christian community: to journey alongside each other, to support each other, encourage each other. Because sooner or later we come to a point where we cannot do it ourselves. That's why, after his Transfiguration, Jesus immediately speaks of his humiliation - his suffering and death at the hands of cruel men. We realize our *true glory* only by joining ourselves with *Jesus' humility*.

My friends, we are all – each of us - much more than we think we are! We were made for glory! Lent, of course, is the great season in which we are invited to reorient our lives to that direction. But more essentially, we can realize this by opening ourselves to the support, help, encouragement we find in the life of the church. And not just consumers of this! Not just taking (and that's very easy in the church!) But each of us to helping, supporting, building up the church! When we are honest about ourselves, our limitations and failings (and there's no moving forward until we do that!) then we see how much we truly do need each other. And if *we* need others, well then *others* may need us as well. The glory Jesus shows on the mountain he calls us to recognize in ourselves and (perhaps more challenging) a glory we are called to see in each other. May God help us to see that in each other. Amen.