

Lent 2 Year C 2025

In this early stage of Lent, it is good to remind ourselves once more of what Lent is for. As we set out on this annual spiritual pilgrimage, it is good to ask ourselves again the questions: 'Why are we doing all this? Why the disciplines of prayer, fasting and almsgiving? Why the study groups? Why the Stations of the Cross we pray most Sunday evenings here in Lent? Why the Lent quiet day we enjoyed yesterday? Why confession? Why any of it? What's it all for?' Now, as I mentioned in my sermon for Ash Wednesday, you can forget it if you think Lent is simply for 'spiritual reenergisation'. It is not trying to manipulate God by our try-hard spiritual gymnastics. Much less it is a weight loss regime with a pious overlay! (And yes, some do reduce Lent to this!!) And by observing Lent is there a risk we just give fuel to the fire for those who want to dismiss us saying, 'See those Catholic Christians. See all those useless, nonbiblical practices they think are so important.' And if we don't know *why* we are doing this, it can be difficult to respond to such accusations. So, what is it all for then?

Now, it may not have passed your notice that our season of fasting this year coincides with the Islamic fasting month of Ramadan. A Muslim who practices their fast will probably tell you quite easily why they fast. And it is likely to be along the lines of, 'Because it is one of the pillars of Islam. We are obeying one of the central precepts of our religion.' So, in short, their response will be along the lines that they are compelled to, that they are following the rules.

For us, though, the answer is quite different. What is this holy season of Lent? Why any of it? Well, quite simply: *to help draw us closer to Jesus*. We submit to the disciplines of Lent; we fast; we seek to grow in our spiritual lives; we seek to be more generous, not because of some rule or some law. But because we want to draw nearer to Our Lord! Because we want to grow deeper in love of him. And this cannot happen if we simply rely on habit or routine. Indifference or complacency will not help draw us closer to Christ!

But this does perhaps raise a further and important question for us: *who* is the Christ I am seeking to draw closer to? Is it a Christ of my own making, a Christ of my own imagining? Or am I seeking to draw near to the true Christ? Am I seeking to draw closer to what I have called the 'full' Christ?

It can be a great temptation in the Christian life to follow a Christ - indeed to love a Christ - that only bears a partial (or even a feint!) resemblance to the Christ of the gospels. It is a great temptation to *trim off* the parts of Jesus' ministry, personality and actions that we find uncomfortable, and in doing so create a Jesus of our own choosing. Or to give exclusive *emphasis* to other parts of Jesus' ministry and personality and works.

So, we could (and people do!) easily propose a liberal or a progressive or a traditionalist Jesus. There is a Jesus for radicals and introverts. A Jesus for mystics and charismatics. A Jesus of judgment and of nationalism. A grumpy Jesus and an apocalyptic Jesus. We can find a basis for all these somewhere in the gospels! It is really quite startling to realise what a complex and multi-faceted character Jesus is. Importantly, the gospel writers don't try to flatten out the complex, even apparently contradictory, aspects of Jesus' person. And this should give us confidence that the One they are describing is a true portrait. The challenge for us to is to hold the various pieces together, sometime together in tension.

It is precisely the need to hold together various strands of the Jesus story that our gospel proposes for us today. And that is only possible if we place the gospel passage in a wider context. The account of the Transfiguration of Our Lord is told in all three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke). And so clearly a story of immense significance in the spiritual imagination of the early Christians. And all three place this account immediately after Peter's confession of Jesus at Caesarea Philippi, where Jesus then starts to talk about his betrayal and death. Further, in this passage Luke draws attention to what Jesus 'was to accomplish at Jerusalem'. The promised Christ is also the suffering Christ. The evangelists want us to hold these two truths together: that the Son of Man is one who is humble and obedient even to death; and yet he is also the Glorified One, 'God's Son, the chosen One, the one we ought listen to. Both of these are true about Jesus, and both must be held together. And this is why this story is placed before now, in this early part of Lent. Suffering and Glory belong together. The cross is always remembered in the light of the resurrection. And our own self-denials and small sufferings are not ends in themselves. They prepare us for the joys of Easter.

But Luke's account of the Transfiguration of the Lord widens the horizon even wider. Yes, Cross and Resurrection, suffering and glory are meant to be seen together. But the figures of Moses and Elijah indicate something else as well. Luke uses the phrase 'behold two men' to introduce these important Old Testament figures. But this little turn of phrase, 'behold two men', is also used at the resurrection, and at the ascension.

Now, this does not imply that the men are the same characters, but the phrase connects the three moments (transfiguration, resurrection and ascension) when Jesus' divine identity is most clearly displayed. Mostly, we think of Moses and Elijah as representing the law and the prophets. And this is quite possible. But more than that, in Jewish tradition the mysterious circumstances of Moses' death on Mount Nebo and Elijah's being taken up to God on a chariot of fire, earned them the title of 'the deathless ones'. Their presence with Jesus is an anticipation of Jesus' own conquest of death. But both Moses and Elijah also experienced rejection by and suffering at the hands of God's own people, which makes the connection between the suffering Jesus has just spoken of and the glory which he will receive.

These threads of transfiguration, cross, resurrection and ascension all appearing in this one story only goes to make Peter's offer to make three tents only seem clumsy and inappropriate. He is trying grasp on to *one* moment, *one* aspect. Yes, Peter, James and John have been privileged to witness a momentary drawing back of the veil. They have been granted a glimpse of the heavenly reality of who Jesus really is. But that is not the end of the story. It was surely wondrous, and understandable to want to hold onto this 'peak' moment, this moment of clarity, this moment of clear sight, of privileged encounter. But a bigger story was yet to be told.

In a similar vein, just a few weeks ago someone in this church approached me just before a funeral asking why we had the large crucifix here. 'Jesus is alive!' he asserted. 'He shouldn't be depicted on the cross!' To which I replied, 'Well, it's there to remind us of Christ's saving sacrifice on the cross.' He promptly walked away. But by this man's flawed logic we shouldn't commemorate or depict any scene of Lord's life save after the resurrection. We wouldn't even depict anything of Christmas! But that of course is quite wrong. All the different strands of Jesus' life must be remembered and held together.

Peter's clumsy response, then, should serve as something of a cautionary tale against hankering after rare and privileged spiritual experiences. They may come to us. And if they do, give thanks to God for these privileged graces. We certainly should not remain unmoved by them, or indifferent to them. If they are given us, they should shake us to the core! But then they must be incorporated into the grind of daily lives. They must be accommodated into the wider horizon of life.

The only Jesus worth drawing close to is the full Jesus, the whole Jesus. The gospel account we hear today reminds us how the transfiguration, the resurrection, and the ascension are all linked together. But in every case the moment of glory follows from and arises out of a revelation or a moment of suffering. In the hard and testing times that come to us all, we are challenged to look to the exalted Jesus, and to see our hardship through the lens of hope. All too often we end up choosing which aspects of Jesus we like or find convivial, and ignore other aspects of who he is, so end up making Jesus in our own image. But, just as with the first disciples, he will not allow us to pick and choose; if he is not Lord in all the ways he claims, he is not Lord at all. Amen.