



Sermon for 23rd February 2020 – Sunday before Lent

Have you ever read the last pages of a book before you read the start, just to see what happens? To see if it's the sort of book you'd enjoy? Or you just can't wait to see the end? I've done it and it really does spoil the book – quite often I don't bother to finish it. Which is a shame, because I miss out on what would have been a really enjoyable and gripping story.

Someone said to me last week, I don't bother with the Old Testament, I just look at the New Testament.

She's missing out and only getting half the story, and that out of context too. How can she make sense of what Jesus is, what he's about, without reading the first half of the story?

We have a prime example with our readings today. When I was preparing, I highlighted all the similarities between the OT reading in Exodus and Matthew's Gospel. Both events take place up a high mountain, both have a cloud, both involve Moses and the voice of God. Moses is up the mountain for 40 days and nights – Jesus is in the desert for 40 days and nights before he begins his ministry. Moses leads the Israelites to the Promised Land, Jesus leads all people to a new land, the Kingdom of God.

Tradition has it that Moses went up Mount Sinai, and that Jesus went up Mount Tabor, a large round hill in central Galilee – and if you go there today, you need to take a taxi to the top – they say that God is especially pleased with the mount Tabor taxis, because more praying goes on in the few minutes hurtling up or down the narrow mountain road in those taxis than in the rest of the week.

But there's more going on than the location in these readings. Both depict very strange, unbelievable happenings. Jesus is transformed in front of his disciples, his face shone like the sun and his clothes became as white as light, and Moses and Elijah appeared and talked to him. If that's not enough, the terrified disciples, ordinary working men, heard God's voice saying that Jesus was his son, and He was delighted with him. Moses and Elijah also, if we look at the same account in Luke's gospel, shine like stars. So what's going on?

In Exodus, when Moses goes up the mountain, it's to receive the law, the tablets of stone. So when he appears, talking with Jesus, he represents the law, as given to the Israelites centuries before. Have you ever wondered why they had to be given such detailed instructions on how to live? We probably just take them at face value, but we need to remember that these people had been slaves for generations, growing up in Egypt, an alien culture which thought their rulers were Gods, that worshipped cats and hippos, the sun and the moon. They were told what to do every minute of the day, with no freedom of speech or where they lived, or how to make a living.

Many rough sleepers, many homeless people nowadays, are there because they were institutionalised – a large percentage sadly are ex armed forces personnel who simply don't know how to live in the civilian world, they are so used to being provided with food, housing and told what to do. They are given resettlement packages but for some it's not enough. And for the Israelites escaping from slavery in Egypt, there was no resettlement package – they just packed up and went overnight. Freedom at last. Freedom is a wonderful thing but it comes with responsibilities and the Israelites weren't used to that, didn't know what to do with it.

So God gave them a blue print for living.



These people were special – God had them in mind for a very important job – they were to be his priests, his intermediaries between Him and the people of earth. They were to lead by example, to bring all people to God, to live good lives.

But of course they didn't do that. Time and again they rebelled against God or simply drifted away. Elijah appears to Jesus and his 3 followers on the mountain, representing the prophets, all of whom warned the Israelites of the consequences of their folly, of stepping off the right path, following their own desires and doing bad things. And Jesus is the last in the line of the prophets – but he's not just a prophet, warning the Jews to turn back to the one true God, he's God's own son, the Messiah.

So we have lots of parallels between Moses and Jesus, but there's a huge contrast looming between the glorious transfiguration of Christ, when Peter, James and John caught a glimpse of who or what Jesus actually is, how amazing, how powerful, how divine in the true sense of the word, how he shines, and the crucifixion to come. Tom Wright, in his book on Matthew's gospel, puts it like this "Here, on a mountain, is Jesus, revealed in glory; there, on a hill outside Jerusalem, is Jesus, revealed in shame. Here, his clothes are shining white; there, they have been stripped off, and the soldiers have gambled for them. Here, he is flanked by Moses and Elijah, two of Israel's greatest heroes, representing the law and the prophets; there, he is flanked by two brigands, representing the level to which Israel had sunk in rebellion against God. Here, a bright cloud overshadows the scene; there, darkness comes upon the land. Here, Peter blurts out how wonderful it all is; there, he is hiding in shame after denying he even knows Jesus. Here a voice from God himself declares that this is his wonderful son; there, a pagan soldier declares, in surprise, that this really was God's son."

So whilst we marvel and wonder at today's readings, when it comes to Easter, we need to look at the glorious transfiguration of Jesus alongside the shame and pain of the crucifixion. It's all part of the same story that started with Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, their rapid fall from grace, through Moses rescuing the Israelites from slavery, through to God's own son dying on the cross for us all to make an end to death and to lead us to the new promised land.

Will we follow Jesus to that promised land willingly and whole heartedly, taking all the difficulties and dangers involved in being a Christian cheerfully? Or will we be like the Israelites, whinging and moaning and going off the track repeatedly as they trailed after Moses and the pillar of fire? It's up to us.