

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon –Sunday next before Lent

14th February 2021

All Saints' Marseille

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The news that the actor Christopher Plummer had died last week at the age of 91 reminded me of a story which a friend of mine tells about going to see the film *The Sound of Music* (*La Mélodie du bonheur*) when it was released in 1965. In the film Christopher Plummer plays the part of Captain von Trapp, the widowed father of seven children for whom the ex-novice nun Maria, played by Julie Andrews, is recruited as a governess. My friend recalls that, after the first encounter between the two characters, which didn't go at all well, a lady in the row in front of him (who had seen the film before) turned to her neighbour and said: 'It's all right, she marries him in the end.'

What, you might ask, does that have to do with our Gospel reading this morning? Well, there's a sense in which the Transfiguration scene offers Jesus's three closest friends (and, through them, us) reassurance of the ultimate outcome of his story in advance of the distressing events that lie ahead. Later we recall that it's the same three friends who are with him in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before his death. The Transfiguration takes place just before Jesus and his disciples begin their journey to Jerusalem, to face the opposition and hostility that will culminate in his arrest, trial and crucifixion. But before the journey

begins, this scene offers them a glimpse of the glory that will ultimately be revealed in his resurrection.

As Rowan Williams writes in the book which we will be studying together in Lent, *Candles in the Dark*, Jesus's three closest followers saw blinding light streaming from his face as they prayed with him on the mountain, that location where throughout the Bible people have gone to encounter God:

'They were granted briefly to see the unbearable radiance of presence and action that streams eternally from God – and to see it in the travel-stained, dishevelled humanity of their friend and teacher. They saw a human face and understood that behind and beyond it was infinite love and beauty – so that when, later on, they looked on that face disfigured and bleeding they should not forget the brightness of the mystery that shone through it. ... [W]hatever terrors, crimes and catastrophes might follow, nothing could extinguish that eternal light.'

It has been suggested that the Transfiguration scene contains the whole of the Old Testament - in the disciples' awareness of Jesus in dialogue with Moses and Elijah, representing the Law and the Prophets. It has been also suggested that the scene contains the whole of the New Testament - with its echo of Jesus's baptism ('This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him'), the reference to his passion and death (Luke's version refers to Jesus discussing with Moses and Elijah his forthcoming 'departure' or 'exodus' in Jerusalem), and finally the foretaste of his resurrection and ascension. The Transfiguration story marks a key moment in the Gospel, a point of revelation, a meeting place of the temporal with the eternal, with Jesus as the link between heaven and earth.

What might the story mean for us now? How might it help us as we stand on the threshold of Lent in a time of pandemic? I would like to suggest two ways, which we might try to put into practice in the weeks ahead.

The first is a form of prayer, which we explored back in October when we were thinking about St Luke and what we mean by prayers for healing. The same types of prayer can apply to the impact of a pandemic. First, there is the prayer of Resurrection ('Please take this virus away'). Then there's the prayer of Incarnation ('Please make those who are suffering feel your presence with them and find strength in it'). And then there's the prayer of Transfiguration ('If this has to be, then please make this time in our lives a revelation of your glory, so that we look back on this time and realise that in it we discovered who you are, who we are and what matters most in life'). This sort of prayer can sometimes be difficult to say, but it can dramatically alter how we feel, altering our perception.

The second way the Transfiguration story might help us at the moment is by encouraging us to be more alert to the presence and activity of God in everyday life.

Four hundred years ago, George Herbert left the post of Public Orator at the University of Cambridge, which was a high-profile role. From there he might have been expected to go on to occupy a senior role in public or political life. Instead, Herbert chose to become the parish priest of a small country village, where he proceeded to compose some of the most beautiful reflections that have ever been written on the subject of priesthood. George Herbert also wrote poetry, though he was so unsure of its quality that, shortly before his death at

the age of 39, he sent the poems to his friend Nicholas Ferrar instructing him to destroy them if he didn't think they were any good. Fortunately, Ferrar reached the opposite conclusion, and George Herbert is now above all remembered for his poetry. Our offertory hymn today is one of his best-known poems set to music, 'Teach me my God and King'.

The hymn is about how transfiguration can be experienced in daily life if we can learn to see life as a divine gift, to which we are to respond by our words and actions. In the last verse Herbert refers to the 'philosopher's stone', also known as the 'tincture' or the 'elixir'. (The poem from which the hymn comes is called *The Elixir*.) It's a reference to the medieval practice of alchemy, a forerunner of chemistry, whose elusive goal was to turn base metals into gold. We still use the word 'alchemy' today, but its modern definition is 'a power or process that changes or transforms something in a mysterious way'.

That's Herbert's point. It is possible to feel different about our lives – even the most mundane of tasks we have to do - if we offer them to God. I remember being taught this when I was in my first job at the age of 18. I was working below ground in a large hotel in Vienna, primarily to learn German which I was preparing to study at university. Through the work in the hotel I did learn some German, but rather more about life.

At the end of each working day there was a task that involved counting and bundling up all the linen that had been used in the hotel, in a sweltering corner of the cellar. Somehow, whenever this task needed doing, my colleagues all became incredibly busy doing something else, so invariably I found myself holding the short straw. One day I complained about this to a wise woman at

the English church in Vienna (which was my first introduction to the Diocese in Europe). She replied: 'Try saying to yourself while you are doing the task, 'Do this in remembrance of me'.' It was transformative, and I have never forgotten her advice.

'All may of thee partake:
Nothing can be so mean,
Which with this tincture: 'for thy sake'
Will not grow bright and clean.'

Commenting on that verse, Herbert's biographer John Drury wrote: 'to make God our ultimate end in all we do, in the simple but taxing things of everyday life, is the Christian vocation.'

So as one of the things we might try doing during Lent, when faced with something difficult – and there are enough difficult things at the moment even if we are not directly involved in battling the pandemic – we could do worse than say to ourselves, 'Do this in remembrance of me'. And watch how something we thought was base turns into gold.

There's one more thing. Small gestures can make a big difference. We might look back on our own difficult experiences and notice how other people have made them more bearable for us. During Lent, let's ask ourselves if there is anything we could do for another person, to make them feel the same.

Amen.