

## **Sunday before Lent 2017 (26<sup>th</sup> February) – Transfiguration: Matt. 17:1-9**

So we had Christmas, then we blinked, and it was Lent.

You, like me, may be wondering quite how it is that we can have got to Lent so soon. And you may also be feeling completely unprepared for it. You have not, perhaps, even begun to sit down and think what if anything you're going to do this year.

You may also be wondering what on earth *this* Gospel, the story known as the Transfiguration of Jesus, all about shining faces and mountain tops has to do with Lent. Wouldn't it be more sensible, more relevant to have a Gospel about fasting, or discipline, or effort or the Cross?

Well, there will be plenty of those in the coming weeks. There is a good reason, though, for the Transfiguration being the Gospel for this week, and it comes in what that heavenly voice says. *This is my Son, the beloved, in whom I am well pleased: listen to Him.*

*Listen to Him.*

Listening to Jesus is what it is all about. During one of our parish conversations, someone asked what exactly a Christian *was* anyway – what was the definition? Did you have to believe certain things, and how many of them? Did you have to come to church, or pray, or act in certain ways? And I gave a fairly rambling kind of answer, and I hope that person is in church again this morning because this is a better one. Being a Christian means someone who is determined to *listen to Jesus*. And come what may, to go on listening.

Now listening to Jesus doesn't just mean reading what he says in the Gospels and thinking about it, though that is a very, very good start.

Listening to Jesus means something a bit harder to understand but at the same time very simple.

It means discovering more and more that Jesus is not just another person – not just another inspirational teacher and example, even the greatest teacher and example. He's not just another Moses, another Elijah. On the mount of transfiguration, they come and wait on Him. They know that something even greater than them has come, that in the coming of Jesus the world has changed. It is like a door has opened, and suddenly something bigger and vaster and more wonderful than we could possibly have imagined has begun to pour into the world. That's why Jesus' whole being begins to shine with glory. The door is open, and the light is pouring in. And if you listen to Jesus, if you come close to Him, you can go through that door. You can journey into the land He came from, into all the depth and grandeur and vibrancy of God: in a word, into glory.

That's what being a Christian is: being on that journey. And whilst at one level, it is Jesus who calls you and brings you and draws you through the doorway, at another you actually have to do something. Jesus does not club people over the head, and drag them through by the hair. You have to want to go. You have to want to listen, to move towards Jesus, to take first steps. He will do the rest, but you have to move.

And that's what Lent is about. Over long centuries, the Church has found that we need a special time of year when we re-commit to doing our bit, to listening to Jesus, to moving towards the door. There have been four basic ways of doing this, ways which so many Christians have found work. They go together, by the way: none is more important than the others, and each of them is quite simply essential to good discipleship. Think about them, and ask what part they will play in *your* Lent.

1. The first way through the door, of listening to Jesus, is quite simply prayer. Quite simply, you need to make time for wanting Jesus – for being still, and just saying to Him: Here I am. I may not have a clue about how all this works, and I know I have all sorts of questions for you, but I trust that if I give you this time, at some deep level of my being You are going to do something, You are going to draw me in. So I give you this time. I set aside everything else, I try to turn my mind and heart towards you, and I trust that you will work.

It seems to me that this is the absolutely basic starting point and ongoing reality of all Christian discipleship. If we're not doing this, as individuals and as a Church, we will never really grow, in any way. Not in faith, not in love, not in numbers. And that's why one of the most important things we're going to do as a church in the next few weeks is start a weekly session when we simply do that – sit still together and ask God to work. It might feel odd, frustrating, ineffective at times – it *will* seem all those things – but it is the very heart of discipleship. It will be every Wednesday at 11, from the 15<sup>th</sup> of March: if you can, come and join us. And for those of you who cannot do daytimes, we'll be doing something in the evenings too.

2. The second way of listening to Jesus, of going through the door, is to read the Gospels very, very slowly. Why not choose just one, to read throughout Lent? Don't read it like a newspaper article. Read it *slowly*. Take long, serious, absorbing time, and ask God through your reading to speak to you. Talk to me, or someone else, about what reading it makes happen within you – the questions, the feelings, the reactions. God gave us the Bible for a reason: it is the path to the door. In Lent, *use it*.
  
3. The third way of listening to Jesus is to *stop* listening to other things. Cut things out. Focus. This is partly what fasting is about. People stopped eating, a bit, not to lose weight or punish themselves but to say you know what? There are things more important than my urge to eat: I will give that time, that energy, that desire to Jesus and God instead – perhaps, to reading the Gospels. And if that is true of the desire to eat, then how much more could it be true of the desire to buy unnecessary things, or watch TV, or play on Facebook? You will know the thing in your life which is clutter, distraction – not necessarily a bad thing, but which sometimes gets in the way. Lent is the time, for a while at least, to lay it aside.

4. And lastly, giving. The more you listen to Jesus, the more you go through the door, the more you will become like Him. And He is the one who gives everything away: who says this is my body given for you, this is my blood, shed for you. If you were looking for a one-word description of Jesus, generosity would do: sheer, unlimited, unqualified, to the bottom generosity. In him there is no selfishness *at all*.

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Well, there will be plenty of those in the coming weeks. There is a good reason, though, for the Transfiguration being the Gospel for this week, and it comes in what that heavenly voice says. *This is my Son, the beloved, in whom I am well pleased: listen to Him.*

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Listening to Jesus is what it is all about. During one of our parish conversations, someone asked what exactly a Christian *was* anyway – what was the definition? Did you have to believe certain things, and how many of them? Did you have to come to church, or pray, or act in certain ways? And I gave a fairly rambling kind of answer, and I hope that person is in church again this morning because this is a better one. Being a Christian means someone who is determined to *listen to Jesus*. And come what may, to go on listening.

Now listening to Jesus doesn't just mean reading what he says in the Gospels and thinking about it, though that is a very, very good start.

Listening to Jesus means something a bit harder to understand but at the same time very simple.

It means discovering more and more that Jesus is not just another person – not just another inspirational teacher and example, even the greatest teacher and example. He's not just another Moses, another Elijah. On the mount of transfiguration, they come and wait on Him. They know that something even greater than them has come, that in the coming of Jesus the world has changed. It is like a door has opened, and suddenly something bigger and vaster and more wonderful than we could possibly have imagined has begun to pour into the world. That's why Jesus' whole being begins to shine with glory. The door is open, and the light is pouring in. And if you listen to Jesus, if you come close to Him, you can go through that door. You can journey into the land He came from, into all the depth and grandeur and vibrancy of God: in a word, into glory.

That's what being a Christian is: being on that journey. And whilst at one level, it is Jesus who calls you and brings you and draws you through the doorway, at another you actually have to do something. Jesus does not club people over the head, and drag them through by the hair. You have to want to go. You have to want to listen, to move towards Jesus, to take first steps. He will do the rest, but you have to move.

And that's what Lent is about. Over long centuries, the Church has found that we need a special time of year when we re-commit to doing our bit, to listening to Jesus, to moving towards the door. There have been four basic ways of doing this, ways which so many Christians have found work. They go together, by the way: none is more important than the others, and each of them is quite simply essential to good discipleship. Think about them, and ask what part they will play in *your* Lent.

1. The first way through the door, of listening to Jesus, is quite simply prayer. Quite simply, you need to make time for wanting Jesus – for being still, and just saying to Him: Here I am. I may not have a clue about how all this works, and I know I have all sorts of questions for you, but I trust that if I give you this time, at some deep level of my being You are going to do something, You are going to draw me in. So I give you this time. I set aside everything else, I try to turn my mind and heart towards you, and I trust that you will work.

It seems to me that this is the absolutely basic starting point and ongoing reality of all Christian discipleship. If we're not doing this, as individuals and as a Church, we will never really grow, in any way. Not in faith, not in love, not in numbers. And that's why one of the most important things we're going to do as a church in the next few weeks is start a weekly session when we simply do that – sit still together and ask God to work. It might feel odd, frustrating, ineffective at times – it *will* seem all those things – but it is the very heart of discipleship. It will be every Wednesday at 11, from the 15<sup>th</sup> of March: if you can, come and join us. And for those of you who cannot do daytimes, we'll be doing something in the evenings too.

2. The second way of listening to Jesus, of going through the door, is to read the Gospels very, very slowly. Why not choose just one, to read throughout Lent? Don't read it like a newspaper article. Read it *slowly*. Take long, serious, absorbing time, and ask God through your reading to speak to you. Talk to me, or someone else, about what reading it makes happen within you – the questions, the feelings, the reactions. God gave us the Bible for a reason: it is the path to the door. In Lent, *use it*.
  
3. The third way of listening to Jesus is to *stop* listening to other things. Cut things out. Focus. This is partly what fasting is about. People stopped eating, a bit, not to lose weight or punish themselves but to say you know what? There are things more important than my urge to eat: I will give that time, that energy, that desire to Jesus and God instead – perhaps, to reading the Gospels. And if that is true of the desire to eat, then how much more could it be true of the desire to buy unnecessary things, or watch TV, or play on Facebook? You will know the thing in your life which is clutter, distraction – not necessarily a bad thing, but which sometimes gets in the way. Lent is the time, for a while at least, to lay it aside.

4. And lastly, giving. The more you listen to Jesus, the more you go through the door, the more you will become like Him. And He is the one who gives everything away: who says this is my body given for you, this is my blood, shed for you. If you were looking for a one-word description of Jesus, generosity would do: sheer, unlimited, unqualified, to the bottom generosity. In him there is no selfishness *at all*.

Well, when we are through the doorway, you and I will be like that too. And so now is the time to get ready, to rehearse. We need to train ourselves, now, to be more and more generous. In our ways of thinking, in how we speak, in how we deal with people, and not least in what we do with money. What people do with money, says Jesus, shows who they really are: where your treasure is, there is your heart. So Christians need to be people who are becoming steadily more generous with their money. Because we would often rather forget that fact, it is good to have a fixed time each year when it confronts us. Lent is that time. By Easter, we each need to have thought again about our giving.

Not incidentally, that that necessarily means giving more to the Church. It is good and important to give to the Church, and fear not - you will hear plenty more about that in weeks and months to come. But it is even more important to simply *give* – to see where in the world your generosity, your money can make a real difference, and to actually do it. It might be refugees, it might be Water Aid, it might be the church. It should, probably, be a mix. Whatever it is, the key thing for you in Lent is to think about it, pray about it, and *do something* about it. For nearly all of us, barring unusual circumstances, Lent should involve a cheque book or Direct Debit form.

Prayer. Bible. Fasting. Giving. Those are the elements of a good Lent. Those are the things which will make you grow as a Christian, and us grow as a church. They will make you ready for the doorway, ready to enter the glory of the kingdom. Use these last few days before Wednesday to think about how they will shape your Lent this year.