

Sunday before Lent, 2025

Luke 9:28-36

Thank God it's March.

I don't know about you, but for me, January and February just seemed to go on, and on, and on.

And most of it seemed to be traffic lights, potholes, roadworks, and rain. Lots of rain.

And Trump.

I cannot tell you how glad I have been in the last few days to see some sunshine, and some blue sky, and some signs of Spring.

But now what's this. Lurking just round the corner. Waiting for me on Wednesday. Here it comes. Lent.

Now it would be very easy to groan inwardly about this. Blooming Lent. I'm just about managing to keep going at the moment, just about putting one foot in front of the other, and God wants me to try extra hard. To give up my treats. To do without my wine, and to pray more, give more, *be* more. To be spiritually strong, spiritually disciplined. I do not wish to do any of that. I want to go on holiday, preferably to a beach and an all inclusive bar.

(At this point, I should pause, and say, of course, that *I'm* not feeling any of this, you understand. I'm just trying to empathise. To imagine what other, lesser, spiritually inferior kind of Christians might be feeling. Being an advanced spiritual master, it takes some effort to reach across that gap, but I'm doing my best).

Blooming Lent.

Well. I can't deny that part of Lent is exactly all of this stuff. Effort, discipline, try harder, be a spiritual athlete. All of that does have its place. And the bit of me, and of you, that feels like just going to the beach instead will simply have to buck its ideas up, and accept that in any serious Christian life a bit of stamina, a bit of toughness, a bit of self-denial comes with the territory. More of that, no doubt, in Sundays to come as we go through Lent.

However, it is really striking that for today, the Sunday just before Lent, the Gospel the Church gives us is the Gospel of the Transfiguration. The Gospel, that is, of human nature being lit up with glory and brilliance and power far beyond anything we could possibly produce for ourselves. The story of Jesus on the mountaintop, suddenly lit up, his whole being somehow shining like the sun. Fiercer, more glorious than the sun. It's a story about Jesus, of course, but the New Testament has always understood it also as a promise for us: this is where humanity is headed. This is where *you* are headed. Into beauty and power and wonder far beyond your imagining.

That Gospel puts Lent in its right place. It *is* about effort and discipline and spiritual athletics. To some extent. But only as a kind of getting ready for, a turning our face towards, this incredible destiny, which no amount of effort and discipline could actually bring about. The very, very most that all of our prayer, all of our giving, all of our fasting, all of our study - all those things you're meant to do during Lent, those classic spiritual disciplines - all they do, at the very most, is turn us towards that sunrise, that spring. They're ways of reminding us of what lies ahead, and ways of getting us ready to receive it.

I guess what I'm trying to say is this. I hope you've got good ideas for what you might do this Lent. There might be habits of prayer you want to develop. There might be a good spiritual book you're going to read - look on the bookshelves at the back of church if there isn't. They're all free to borrow, just bring them back. You might come to our Lent Course, about heresies, starting Thursday. You will, I trust, be thinking seriously about giving - giving to all God cares about, and indeed to the church as part of our Stewardship campaign. And, no doubt, you'll be giving something up: wine, chocolate, Pepsi Max, whatever. If you haven't thought all this through yet, and decided what your Lenten pattern is going to be, let me urge you to do so in the next few days. Please don't miss the opportunity for spiritual growth that Lent provides. And if it would help, talk to me or Helen for ideas.

However, and this is the key point. Don't approach it all full of gloom and misery. And don't treat it like some great trial of spiritual strength, where you have to become the great master, the great disciplined person. If you do, you'll only inflict misery on yourself and those around you. Lent is not about being miserable. It's about turning your face towards the sunrise. It's about looking at Jesus Christ, ablaze with brilliance and beauty, and thinking 'that what's I'm made for. That's where I'm going. That's who I am one with'. Keep your eyes on the prize. Not on yourself, and your own strength, and your own little internal dramas. No, eyes on Jesus. Eyes on humanity set on fire with God. Eyes on the coming glory that will envelop us all. That's where strength comes from. That's where growth comes from. Set your heart there.

That's what Lent is all about. Let's go into it with resolve, with toughness, yes, but above all with hope and joy.

Amen.