Sermon Transfiguration 08.08.21 CC

The Parish Retreat was supposed to have happened in January- but like everything else, was postponed and eventually took place last weekend at Douai Abbey in Berkshire. It’s the home of a Roman Catholic order of monks and priests, set high up on a hill of the Cotswolds. We’ve been going there as a parish for 10 years or so now, usually up to 20 people, but this year, because of the social distancing regulations, only twelve were allowed.

Taking twelve people away for a time of reflection, meditation, time out, prayer, being together with a common purpose, sounds exactly like the sort of thing that Jesus did many times over. In the Gospel reading today, the story of Jesus being transfigured, changed, transformed, is set after he had gathered the twelve back around him after they’d been out, living as he’d taught them- healing, feeding, reconciling, modelling a new way of living in and for God unfettered by everything except mutual love.

When they’d come back, full of positivity, with many a story to tell, Jesus takes three of them, on one of his retreats, up a mountain, to pray. Now the early hearers of this story- they would have understood the significance of these words – up the mountain to pray- this was formulaic language, pointing right back to Moses ascending the mountain in order to converse with God. For, in a classical, vertically structured world, to go up high is metaphorically, to get closer to God. This, Luke tells us, was about an opportunity to draw closer to the heart of things, or as the psalmist reminds us that we might ‘be still and know that I am God’. In a sense it’s serendipitous that we celebrate the Transfiguration in August, because, for us that’s probably the month that most of us have a bit more leisure, take a holiday, have a break from the things that keep us in the daily routine. This is perhaps the time to step outside the daily round the common task, to lift our eyes beyond the horizon of the mundane and see life anew. Most of us are simply too busy with ‘stuff’, to have opportunity, or are too comfortable with our everyday, to risk moving beyond the routine- to reflect on meaning, ultimate values, things that can’t be seen or touched or counted.

But whether you are a religious person or not, for most of us there will be moments, days or perhaps seasons of doubt, when faced with despair or disappointment, injustice or pain, when we wonder about the point of it all. Wonder whether there really is more to life than the immediate. Are we anything more than a particular collection of genetic material, temporarily vivified?

Perhaps the Transfiguration is, above all, a chance to reflect that there might just be something more than DNA which defines us. If we are one in Christ, through our baptism and our feeding on him, our attempts to live and love like him, then perhaps Transfiguration is at least a glimpse of that transformation which is possible, not as atomised individuals but in relationship. In relationship, because the Transfiguration shows Jesus in relationship- yes, with Moses and Elijah, a continuing, transformed relationship of all that had gone before in the Law and the prophets, not denying or negating the inheritance of the faithful Hebrew people; in relationship with Peter James and John who Jesus had taken with him as the future of his divine commission, and we, as their inheritors; and in Relationship with God, for Jesus, Luke tells us, had gone up the mountain to pray, not for the view, not for a bit of peace and quiet, but to pray, ie to be in relationship with God.

Things happen in prayer when we are open to change. We know, don’t we, that however tempted we are to treat it like this, prayer is not the equivalent of a shopping list, not telling God what we need, to get through the next week or what the world needs to get through the next crisis, but it is about the risky opening up of ourselves to be changed, by our relationship with God. We read that the dazzling, blinding light transformed Jesus when he opens himself to God. The cloud, which covers the disciples descends when they try to overthink things, to rationalise, file, understand with human horizons, what they are seeing. It gets them precisely nowhere. It’s a thought echoed- in an ancient English book, from the 13th C, called The Cloud of Unknowing in which the anonymous author offers the thought

‘God may well be loved, but never thought. By love God can be caught and held, but by thinking never…strike that thick cloud of unknowing with the sharp dart of longing love’

The 6th August, the Feast of the Transfiguration is also of course, the day when, 76 years ago, the first atomic bomb was dropped above Hiroshima and the threat of the nuclear age began. That nuclear cloud sucked everything into destruction. The cloud of unknowing which is based upon risky openness to God’s transforming love, however, gives us an opportunity to reflect upon that reality which lies beyond what we think we can know or control or determine, when it has love at its heart. Perhaps this August take time to risk some retreat, a quiet moment, a reflective spot,- in the shower, in the park, in the kitchen or even up a mountain, that God who cannot be held or understood, may embrace and inspire us.

So as we remember Chrsit transfigured on the mountain top here’s my August joke this week:

What’s the mountain climber’s favourite drink….Anything on the rocks.

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06.08.21