

Love Lent: a time to seek transfiguration

A sermon for the Sunday before Lent 2021 in the West Hereford Team Benefice

It's Quinquagesima Sunday in old money. I remember being fascinated by the word as a boy, looking at the prayer book when I should have been listening to my dad preach. It means 50th in Latin, 50 days to go until Easter, which was very confusing because while the 40 days of Lent work by not including Sundays, the 50 here does include them, at both ends. If this sermon gets too boring you can try out the maths in your head. No calculators are allowed.

But more importantly and understandably it's the Sunday before Lent and if you're listening to or reading this sermon at 11am on that Sunday there are just 67 hours, or 4020 minutes before waking up on Ash Wednesday to sort out what you are going to do during Lent this year. So we'd better crack on.

This sermon then is about what Lent might mean for us this year, but the modern lectionary also makes it Transfiguration Sunday, and of course it's St Valentine's Day, so it's going to be about Loving in Lent and Loving Lent, as time of transfiguration for us to explore.

Transfiguration. The last time you came across the word outside church it was probably in Harry Potter. Wiki tells us that at Hogwarts it was a branch of magic that focused on the alteration of the form or appearance of an object. Now bishops are to this day known to walk around in pointy hats and long cloaks, carrying staffs and wearing special rings. And sometimes the ability to say a spell or wave a wand and transfigure some recalcitrant cleric into a toad is tempting. But I have to tell you it's all made up. A dictionary definition of transfiguration does still lead on appearances though: "A transformation or glorification in appearance or form."

Now this is misleading for our purposes, because the whole point of the bible story is not that it disguises Jesus or turns him into something else but that in it he is revealed for who he is, the Son of God. It echoes the glorious appearance Moses acquired when he went up the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments, but here is one greater than Moses, to whom the glory inherently belongs. It stands in the middle of the gospel narrative and looks back to Jesus' baptism when the voice from heaven declaring his identity was first heard and looks ahead to his ascension when a cloud again surrounds him and he is received back into heaven

So transfiguration in our tradition is not about Jesus putting on an appearance of god or godliness, but about us seeing who he is really is, and about us seeking the grace and gifts from him that can enable us to be transformed by his Spirit and share in his life and work.

The disciples got it so wrong. Instead of being transformed and inspired they are terrified and rooted to the spot. To make the point more strongly let me take you in your imagination to a favourite place of mine, the little church at Kirkandrews-on-Esk on the Scots border near Carlisle. It's a beautiful little Georgian estate chapel, sprinkled with fairy dust by the great Victorian architect Temple Moore, and still attracting a rather top-drawer congregation to its wall-to-wall Book of Common Prayer services. I loved to go there as archdeacon and tease the local Graham nobility about Jean's Scots border reiving ancestry. And to preach on the painting that hangs over the altar.

Yes it's *The Transfiguration* by Raphael. But no, it's a copy not the original, or it wouldn't last there long with all those reivers about. The thing I love most about the painting is that it gives us the whole story, including the bit Mark leaves out but Matthew leaves in, that Jesus needs to come down from the mountain to help the

disciples who, with Bible open, and gesticulating all over the place, are failing completely to heal a boy with seizures.



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That's why it's so important not to stay on the top of the mountain getting a religious fix with Jesus safely enclosed in a shelter, but to open ourselves as best as we can to his transfiguring presence and then follow him back into the everyday unmagic world and take what transfiguration we can to its everyday needs.

Where does St Valentine come into all this? Everywhere, because as Andrew Lloyd Webber's song puts it, *Love, love changes everything: Hands and faces, Earth and sky. Love, Love changes everything: How you live and How you die. Love Can make the summer fly Or a night Seem like a lifetime. Yes, Love, Love changes everything: Now I tremble At your name. Nothing in the world will ever Be the same.* Lloyd Webber is an agnostic but it doesn't feel like an accident that the song makes a fine hymn and works very well if you name 'Christ' instead of the more generic 'Love'.

But it's loving like Christ not singing his name that takes his love to the world. When we gaze on the transfigured Christ we seek and pray to be filled and changed by his love. It's more about relationship than religion, if I can put it like that. And when we go down from the mountain and gaze on people in need, all the virtue signalling in the world won't bring them the healing, hope, freedom and dignity that it truly theirs. We need to show love.

The challenge of Lent for me, then, is to somehow try to let more life and more love back into my faith, in my relationship with God, and in my relationships with people. Each of us must find our own path, our own rhythm for that. But as a benefice we will be making some offers during Lent. John Simpson will be speaking at a weekly Zoom gathering on little known books of the Bible. Smaller groups will also meet, to discuss Pope Francis' book *Let us Dream*, and to look at Sathnam Sanghera's *Empireland*, both in their own way raising important questions of what we have become and what we could be. And there will be daily thoughts on our media pages including material from the archbishops' call to pray for the nation.

Beyond all that is the very practical question of what we are actually going to do when the talking is over. Come back next week to hear Jacky Sewell preaching on that and especially on what we can take on positively as opposed to just giving things up (though there is a place for that too). And later in Lent get ready for a whole Zoom service led by our young people that will explore our Christian action as well. Now that's something to look forward to.

David Thomson