

**A Sermon preached by the Dean of Windsor, the Rt Reverend Dr Christopher Cocksworth, on the Sunday Next before Lent, Quinquagesima, 11<sup>th</sup> February 2024**

***The Readings:  
2 Kings 2.1-12 & Mark 9. 1-9***

### **Peter stuck for words**

‘Peter’, says Mark’s account of the Transfiguration of Jesus, ‘did not know what to say’. But Peter, being Peter, didn’t let that stop him. No wonder he’s called the first Christian preacher!

Have you ever had that experience of saying something when you did not really know what to say, and then regretting it afterwards. My wife will tell you that I often used to wake up in the night moaning, ‘Oh no, why did I say that?’.

My worst experience was when I was fourteen. It was my older brother’s 18<sup>th</sup> Birthday party, a big affair full of his very cool friends of whom I was in awe – especially the one who would become an England cricketer. My father put me in charge of the bar – not his best decision. One of my brother’s friends appeared out of nowhere. Whether it was nerves or because I’d been helping myself to the bottles of the bar, I was dazzled and dumbfounded. He looked like the one destined to be an England cricketer but there was something different about him. I didn’t know what to say but I said it anyway, ‘Hello Paul’, when it was really ‘Tony’, another cool friend of my brother whom I wanted to impress but not the cricketer.

### **Peter at Caesarea Philippi**

Peter did better than I in the story that precedes our reading today, and will help us to make sense of today’s reading. ‘Who do **you** say I am?’, Jesus asked his disciples. The other disciples went quiet but Peter, like he always did, filled in the gap. ‘You are the Messiah’ –

the one anointed, chosen and sent by God. It was the right answer – he had seen who Jesus really is. Moments later there was another gap. Peter filled it, and, this time, got it wrong.

Yes, said Jesus, I am the Messiah, sent by God and now let me tell you what that means. 'I will be rejected by the religious leaders, suffer and die and after three days rise again'. It was a shocking thing to say: the Messiah would suffer and die! Peter would have none of it: 'God forbid it Lord'. Peter's rebuke of Jesus was met by Jesus' more stinging rebuke of Peter, 'Get behind me Satan' – you know nothing of divine things.

And let me tell you Peter, Jesus went on to say, what it means to follow me, the Messiah who will suffer and die: 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me'.

### **Peter at the Transfiguration**

All of that took place in the villages around Caesarea Philippi up in the north, with the crowds listening on. Now, in today's reading, Jesus ascends a mountain with three of his disciples, Peter among them. Mountains are important in the Bible. God often makes an appearance on mountains. The veil between heaven and earth is sometimes lifted on mountains. God's voice is heard and just occasionally, God's face is seen on mountains. Moses and Elijah knew all about that. God met them on a mountain. God spoke his word to them on a mountain.

Moses and Elijah both appear on this mountain with Jesus just as he is transfigured before the eyes of the disciples, just as the veil is lifted, just as Jesus' true identity as the Messiah, the Saviour of the world, the Son of God is confirmed such that even his clothes dazzle with an otherworldly whiteness that had never been seen before on earth.

This is where Peter didn't know what to say, but said something anyway: 'Rabbi, it's good for us to be here, let's make three dwellings, one for you, for Moses and for Elijah'.

Actually, it wasn't a bad stab at saying something. Peter, a good Jew, knew that when God appeared to people, shelters – tabernacles, to give them their technical name – were made to – as it were – to contain the presence of God.

What Peter still has to learn is the full reality of his own confession of Jesus as the Messiah, the anointed and sent one. Jesus is the tabernacle – the temple. Jesus *is* the dwelling of God. Jesus is not the prophet like Elijah scooped up in the whirlwind into the heavenly heights of God's presence. He is the presence of God in the earthly reality of human life. Jesus – as our reading last week reminded us – *is the Word made flesh*, who dwells among us and whose glory we see.

Now, there's more glory for Peter to see than even the glory of this momentary transfiguration of his body, this lifting of the veil.

'The voice from heaven speaks from the cloud of God's presence enveloping the mountain: 'This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him'.

Listen to him, Peter, when he says that he must suffer and die for you and then, before your interrupt by telling him that such ignominy would defeat his Messiahship and negate his glory, listen to him also say, 'and on the third day I will rise again'.

The voice ceases, the cloud rises, Moses and Elijah fade away and the disciples – Mark tells us – look around and see 'no one *with them* any more, but only Jesus'. Jesus, the Saviour who will suffer and die and rise on the third day. They are with him.

The three disciples come down from the mountain with Jesus, walking with Jesus on that walk that Canon Hueston pointed us to last week: the walk of the 'Word made flesh' towards the suffering, the death, the cross and the promised rising again. They walk with him still trying to work out what it means to follow a suffering Messiah.

### **Peter after the resurrection**

Do you remember how Peter's walk with Jesus looked as if it had come to an abrupt end? They had arrived in Jerusalem down south. Jesus had been arrested. He was in the High Priest's house, struck and spat upon. A girl by a fire asked Peter, 'Are you with Jesus?'. Perhaps Peter did not know what to say, but he said it anyway: 'I know not the man. I am not with him'; and he wept bitterly through the night.

Peter chose not to be with Jesus in his suffering and death. Three days later, though, he discovered not only the truth of Jesus' promise that he would rise again, not only the truth of the words that began our reading today, 'that some would not see death until they saw the kingdom of God coming with power'. Peter found that Jesus was still **with him**, still loving him, still forgiving him, still calling him.

### **Peter – and we with him – called to follow Christ**

Allow me, if you will, to switch gospel writers. The very last words of Jesus at the end of John's gospel are words to Peter. Actually, Jesus has to interrupt him – Peter is still speaking and still not quite getting it right. 'Peter, follow me'. Literally in the Greek, 'You, me follow'.

And in speaking to Peter he speaks to us. And can you hear the voice from the cloud reverberating through time and eternity: 'This is my Son, the beloved, listen to him'.