

SERMON FOR THE SUNDAY BEFORE LENT | 26.02.2017

So what have you made of this week's politics? Two by-elections – in Copeland and Stoke on Trent - two very different parts of the country, with two very different results. Suddenly we have been deluged with comments from every corner of the nation, trying to assess the significance of what has happened in places which, quite frankly – no one normally notices!

David Milliband (the Prime Minister who never was) tells us that Labour is in its weakest position for fifty years; Theresa May dons her wellies and tells the people of Copeland who haven't voted for her party since the 1930s that we are seeing a resurgence of 'One Nation Conservatism'. UKIP's Paul Nuttall, desperately disappointed not to have been able to make Stoke the Brexit capital of England, says he is *not going nowhere* (which, in his hurt, is probably the opposite of what he actually meant to say).

On this last Sunday before Lent the lectionary gives us a remarkable story: it takes us (we think) to the top of Mount Hermon to share the experience of Peter, James and John as they share the vision of Jesus being 'transfigured': Jesus being shown 'as he really is': the Lord of glory, but in human form. It only last a few seconds – and the disciples are so overcome they miss half of it anyway because they are groveling on the ground. But we have the record, the pictures, the voice and the words that were spoken. We too are able to share the vision that they had.

And that's my theme: it is what the by-elections were all about and what this reading is about: it's about vision. And the question we are invited to play with today, on the cusp of the 40 days of Lent is: what is your vision for the future?

Sitting down with yesterday's newspaper – something I don't do often enough – I took that question into one day's worth of reporting. Quickly just three stories at random: there was the story of Dr Richard Burt whose has spent a lifetime in stem cell research; over the last five years he has managed to halt the progress of Multiple Sclerosis in 80% of his patients; or there was news of the all-women group of MPs who want to set up 'Returnships', a phased process for getting older women back into the workplace after bringing up their families.

Or what about Giorgio Armaroli who has photographed every inch of the 4,000 square metres of the ceiling of the Sistine chapel for art research?

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Or perhaps less helpfully, the story of the Ukrainian oligarch who gave £6million to Cambridge University recently to fund a Centre for Ukrainian studies – much of the cash, say his critics, coming from a life-time in money-laundering; or the impact assessment in the Department of Works and pensions that wants an immediate change in the law because they have realized that there will be a £3.7billion hole in their budget - earmarked for the care of those with disabilities like dementia - unless they do. What drove them, what were their visions?

In today's Gospel story, Jesus takes his closest disciples away from what they knew. And he gave them an experience that would shape the whole of their lives. Standing under a huge cloud – the symbol of the presence of God – they hear, for the second time, the voice of God saying how much he loves his Son. (You will remember that they heard just the same words at Jesus' baptism).

So we find that the Transfiguration event was actually stage two of the lesson they needed to learn. At the Jordan they saw at first hand Jesus' humility: even he would go through the waters of the River Jordan and receive the ministry of repentance from his cousin John the Baptist. Here, on the top of the mountain there is a bigger truth: they had to take to heart the real nature of Jesus' ministry. He wasn't just a good teacher, preacher and teacher, he was a man with a mission, a man on a journey. And that journey would involve his trial and ultimately his death. Jesus would not just see the effects of sin in the world; he would go out and take it away, once and for all.

For Peter, James and John to understand the future, they had to do more than wait to be taught: they had to make this message their own through a vision which was, literally, life changing. Jesus' vision of sacrifice, death and resurrection would gradually become their vision too.

But before we get carried away, it is worth doing a little test. Because if we use the word 'vision', it sound grand and important and sane. But what if I use the word 'visions'? What does that throw up?

Because visions with an extra 's', takes us into a different realm altogether. Aren't *people who have 'visions'* likely to be a bit potty, a bit deluded? Don't we get a bit suspicious of the stories of St Bernadette in Lourdes, or the children of Fatima or Medjugorje or Knock? Don't we think that the great medieval mystics – like Catherine of Siena or Julian of Norwich or Hildegard of Bingen are at bit way out – the result, perhaps of too much fasting and not enough good company?!

Moreover, how do we know – how can we test – whether their visionary experiences were authentic and real? And how can we know, whether the visions they had, what they saw, were only for them - or whether they had meaning for us as well?

Funnily enough we don't have too much difficulty in accepting that St Francis of Assisi received visions which were 'of God'. His visions – about rebuilding the Church, about talking to Muslims and about the need for poverty, seem to have been quite easily accepted. The reason for that, I suspect, is that we know that Francis was a person who was already close to God (a saint if you like) – and all that he said was clearly drawn from the Bible anyway: about loving our neighbour and not clinging onto material things. So how do we test the visions that are emerging in today's Church?

This week, as well as the by-elections, there has been a major meeting of the Church of England's General Synod. Synod, made up of three houses – bishops, clergy and laity - meets twice a year and spends three days each time debating key issues of faith and governance. This week Synod was being asked to 'take note' of a report by the House of Bishops on Christian Marriage. The report had taken three years to put together and followed a national series of 'conversations' shared by people with every conceivable view on human sexuality. The report was chaired by the genial and sensible Bishop of Norwich, Graham James, often heard on Thought for the Day on Radio 4.

And Synod refused to 'take note' of it. The vision it spelt out died on the floor of Church House. And what was that 'vision'? It was a vision that affirmed a traditional of marriage, that it is as a life-long union of a man and a woman; while at the same time it sought to offer pastoral comfort and support (but no services of blessing) to those excluded from marriage because of their same sex attraction.

By all accounts it is a vision that is, currently, impossible to reconcile, as two articles in yesterday's Times made clear. On the one hand Alasdair Paine, Vicar of St Andrew's in Cambridge (a great evangelical power-house that includes the Round Church) started by quoting these words from St Matthew: *Have you not heard, said Jesus: that at the beginning the Creator made them male and female and said, For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united with his wife, and the two shall become one flesh?* Alasdair goes on: *In a sex obsessed society it sounds very strange that fulfillment and the good life can come by holding on to the Bible's teaching. So a further action point for the churches is to do more to make the full Christian message accurately known.*

Professor Diamaid MacCulloch's response was to tell a story. The story was of an evangelical congregation like Alasdair's which woke up one morning to hear that one of its children, a fifteen year old girl, had hanged herself because she believed that God would not accept a gay person. And Diamaid went on to talk about the complete turn-around of that Church *which went on to fully accept gay relationships as part of God's creative purpose.*

Vision matters. That is why all the churches are going through this maelstrom together. These issues are deeply challenging to each and every one of us as we are called to re-examine thoughts and ideas which we have taken for granted for years.

What Jesus wanted for Peter, James and John, he wants for us too. Jesus would not just sit tight and hope for the best. He would walk straight into the hell-hole that was Jerusalem in the first century, challenging every authority, every tradition - and he would lose all his friends. But he would hold onto the vision that God had laid on his shoulders: that he came to save everyone. And that has to be our vision too: to draw all people to faith - to exclude no one - not by race, or wealth or class or gender ... or sexuality.