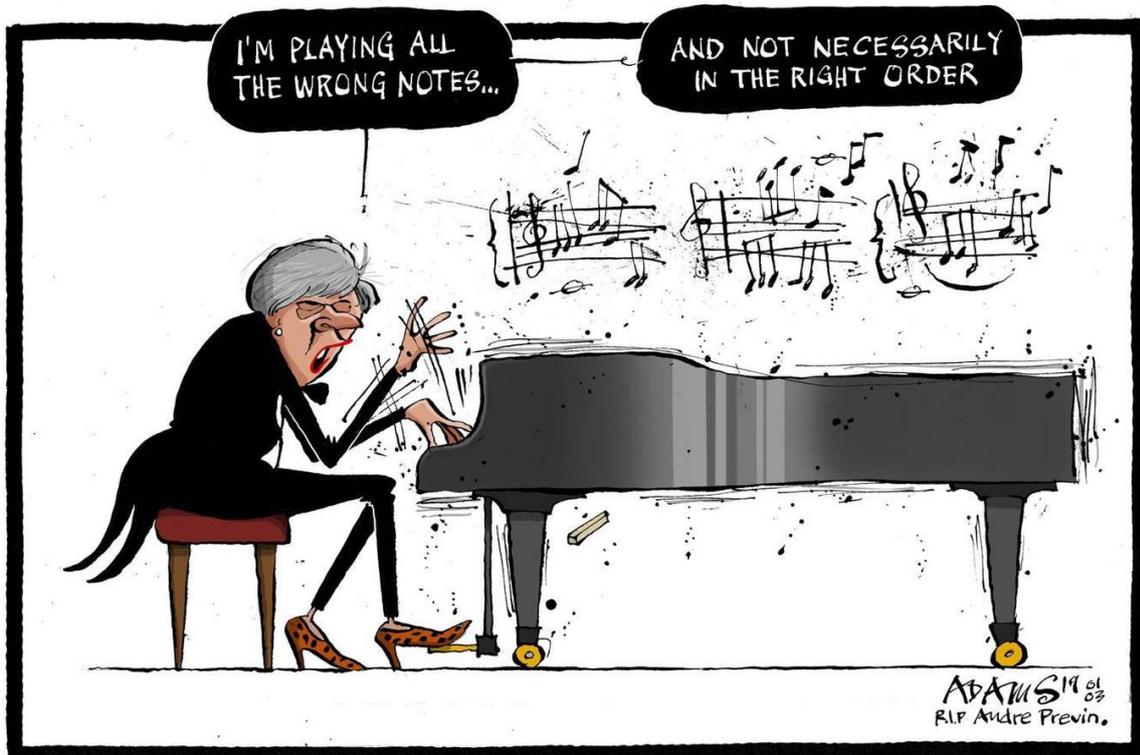


SERMON FOR SUNDAY BEFORE LENT | 03.03.2019 at 8am

Exodus 34: 29-35; 2 Corinthians 3: 14 - 4: 2; St Luke 9: 28-36



I don't know whether you ever see them but I am quite a fan of the Evening Standard cartoonist, Christian Adams. Perhaps he chimes with my politics but he certainly knows how to make clever jokes. Drawing on the famous TV sketch which featured Andre Previn and Eric Morecombe, he has Theresa May sitting at a piano saying: *I am playing all the wrong notes, and not necessarily in the right order...*

But as Sir Graham Brady seems to be urging backbenchers to support the Prime Minister's Brexit deal after all – with an increasing chance that she will finally have the numbers to get her motion through the House of Commons – perhaps the common scepticism that that she didn't know what she was doing nor how to achieve it, was a bit premature.

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 the bigger truth, one that they had to take to heart if they were ever to understand the real nature of Jesus' ministry. He wasn't just a good teacher and preacher, he was a man whose mission would involve the most fractious series of bad relationships – and they in turn would lead to his trial and ultimately his death.

And the questions Jesus poses to them is: *would they ever begin to grasp his vision?*

But before we start getting 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 (for example) 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.

But how do we test the veracity and the integrity of those who hold high office and who would ask us to trust them that their vision is the right one for our day?

Because, as we said last week, putting our trust in any human beings is taking a real pounding right now. We simply don't believe what people have to say – or at least not without a great deal of cynicism.

And the only answer to that has to be taken from Gamaliel, the great Jewish leader who, you will remember, spoke up for the Apostles after Jesus' crucifixion: *I advise you; leave these men alone. Let them, go. For if their purpose and activity is of human origin it will fail. But if it is from God you will not be able to stop these men, you will only find yourselves fighting against God.*

Or from St John's Gospel, the words spoken to Joseph of Arimathea, a secret disciple of Jesus from the Jewish Sanhedrin. Joseph had gone to Jesus by night and heard him speak these words: *I tell you the truth, I speak of what I know. And I testify to what I have seen – and still your people do not believe. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.*

In other words, there is no guarantee that what we hear is true: none. But we have this to carry us through – as James, John and Peter experienced on the mountain: that when we put our faith in God we learn three things: that we have to be in for the long haul, that there will be desperate times of despair and grief; and third, that those who come through trusting in Christ will be vindicated in the end.

There will be any number of false prophets, people dressed up in sheep's clothing; but we who have seen (even for a second) the light, we who have experienced the presence of God and been freed of the fatalism that can so easily overwhelm us, will prove Gamaliel right: *If their purpose and activity is of human origin it will fail. But if it is from God you will not be able to stop these men, you will only find yourselves fighting against God.*

At unexpected times and at moments we can never predict, Jesus takes his beloved up the mountain to see something of his glory: a moment of hope and rationality and joy.

It won't last – it can't. But with luck it will be enough for us to be able to hang on in the long term and be able to rejoice when the moment of revelation comes and we can see how the pain was only a prelude to the glory reserved for those whose have stayed the course.

Having a vision is vital but it isn't ours to put together: that is God's job. All we are asked to do is to share the vision, have faith in the one who serves as the captain of the boat - and cling tight to the ship as it gets buffeted by all the storms. As the old song says: *they that shall endure to the end shall be saved.*

But only for those who are constantly looking for what Jesus has to offer: his ability to transfigure of the world we think we know. It just may not be as we think it is. And for sure, it won't always be this dark! One day, as the great Andre Previn showed, we will end up playing the right notes – and in the right order.