

SERMON FOR I BEFORE LENT | 23.02.2020

Exodus 24: 12-18; 2 Peter 1: 16-end; St Matthew 17: 1-9

We all need it. That explosive ‘rush of adrenalin’ when we are taken out of ourselves and our whole being is caught up in something bigger than ourselves. Yesterday you could feel it in the happiness of Brian and Flo as they heard the words *and now I declare you man and wife* and they simply couldn’t help themselves as they rushed into each other’s arms. For others yesterday it was the moments of triumph as they watched their teams from the terraces of the football, or rugby matches; others will have burst with pride as their friends or family members did something extraordinary: we all have examples – or at least I hope we do. We need those ‘lifts’ and they are all the better when they are unexpected.

Our readings today give us not one but two examples of that self-same adrenalin rush. Moses, having spectacularly led the people through the Red Sea, out of Egypt, on dry land, has now hit a bad patch. Instead of being eternally gratefully for what he had done, the Israelites were whinging and whining unmercifully about their conditions out in the desert - and poor Moses is tired of it all. He has tried to be faithful to what God had told him - and the people are distinctly luke warm about what they are hearing.

So as we read, God invites Moses to take a break, right up in the mountains and away from the crowds. Aaron and Hur can deal with the grumbling: this was one-to-one time for Moses himself – terrifying but life-transforming all in one. We don’t get it in this short passage but the story goes in to say that Moses face was completely changed – everyone could see that. And you’ve seen it too – perhaps in a child when they have got something they desperately wanted. It’s magical.

The example in the Gospel is – as so often with our readings – something of a parallel. This time Jesus takes his three closest friends up to the top of a mountain. And as they stand and stare, suddenly they see Jesus going through something very similar to what happened to Moses: his whole being is – to use the technical term – transfigured: he is filled with light, in some kind of visionary experience, and for that moment time just seems to stop. As they watch they can even see their great heroes of the past, Elijah and, yes, Moses again, standing there talking with Jesus. It’s beyond good it is fantastic...

So it is hardly surprising that head-strong Peter jumps in with a suggestion: *Lord, it is so good to be here; if it is OK with you shall I build three houses – one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah...*

And we understand why he has said that. When these brilliant moments come, we desperately want to hold on to them. We want the adrenalin to keep running: we want the match, the golden moment, the warm experience to run and run.

And it does, there on the top of the mountain, for just one more minute: up there in their beautiful bubble they hear the voice of God: *This is my Son; listen to him.*

And then the vision passes; the figures of Moses and Elijah disappear and Jesus is standing there, just like normal.

So was it worth it? Was it worth having that great experience, only for it to vanish and all too soon? Of course it was! It would be the stuff of stories for years to come. We can hear Peter in our middle reading still drawing strength from their shared experience on the mountain: *We were eyewitnesses to his majesty; we ourselves heard this voice from heaven when we were with him. We had his prophetic message confirmed by what we saw. You would do well to take note of this as you would a lamp shining in the darkness.*

But there is another side to this. You won't necessarily remember but on the front of the **Weekly News last May I recorded the death of Jean Vanier. Universally acclaimed for his work among adults with special needs, he had founded the L'Arche movement where carers and those with learning difficulties live together in a wonderfully supportive way. As I wrote at the time, *Jean Vanier's philosophy centred on his belief that each of us is created in God's image and that every single life is sacred and deserving of respect, protection, and most of all, love.* He himself had set up home with two inmates of a local institution and had created a family environment for them. He had shared his ideas with hundreds of thousands of people. Humble and charismatic, his words have rung true with even more through his books and DVDs. Many had wondered if he wouldn't find his way among the saints in due course. His vision for the Church had been so refreshing and selfless.**

So it was something of a shock to read yesterday that six women had alleged that he had taken advantage of them during times of spiritual direction. Each was unknown to the others but each of the descriptions seemed to be similar. I had to read the piece in the *Independent* twice. I couldn't believe it. If ever there was someone who had managed to demonstrate a Christ-like ministry among the poor and the disadvantaged in our day, surely it was Jean Vanier?

And now the bubble seemed to have burst. We don't have all the evidence yet and no-one is guilty until proven, but the signs are not good. And in a moment our rather world-weary feelings are in danger of taking hold of us once again. Look, here is a near saint – with a wonderful vision of equality for all, able and less able - and what do we discover?

Let's go back to the mountain of Transfiguration and Peter's outburst about building houses, about trying to keep the magic moment for ever. His instinct wasn't wrong, was it? Yes it was wrong, but it was also very natural. We want to keep hold of the good, but somehow it always seems to slip out of our hands. And Jesus never thought otherwise. Where was this experience for Peter, James and John (and for you and me for that matter) going to take us? To the long journey down onto the plain, through deceit and betrayal to another mountain top where Jesus would be nailed to the Cross.

Whatever abusive action Jean Vanier did or didn't inflict on those women, it could never take away from the work that he did among so many. The international L'Arche movement isn't a fraud just because its founder was weak. His vision was not make-believe just because of his alleged inability to control himself. The God-bit of his life-long ministry endures – because it was not about Jean Vanier but about the way the Holy Spirit works in a world that so desperately needs to see God's love in action.

Nothing lasts in quite the pure form we would like. It always gets spoiled. The people who had come through the Red Sea experience weren't suddenly transformed into saints because God had saved them when the Egyptian army was breathing down their necks. The adrenalin lasted for a moment – and then it was back to normal again!

And our own experiences of God are no different. We too lurch from mountain top to the valley. We too receive visions of what could be – and indeed should be. We get excited and we put all our energies into trying to make those visions into a reality. We get glimpses of glory – wonderful encouragement from those who see what we are trying to do. One such from yesterday from someone who had played a concert here last week-end for the first time. She wrote: *It's a lovely church, and long may it house happy worshippers and happy music lovers!* Thanks!

But as we engage with our nine First Communicants and bring them to the Table of the Lord next Sunday morning, the liturgy will say it all: it will be Ashing Sunday too and they won't be able to receive Holy Communion for the first time until they have first been besmirched with black ash: *dust you are, and to dust you shall return.*

How often have you heard me say: both – and?! God continually provides us with wonderful visions of his Kingdom. Talking to guests at the wedding reception yesterday afternoon I was reminded again and again of the power he has to break through our cynicism and our world weariness. People who had very little experience of Church (and in one case, only through a prison chapel) were able to glimpse something of heaven through Brian and Flo's wedding service.

But it will be just for a moment. And then life will move on and new obstacles and challenges will try to derail us again.

Which is why receiving Holy Communion is so important. It isn't down to us to overcome the trials and tribulations – or even the disappointments when other people seem to fail around us. We don't leave the Church because we discover that we all have clay feet. We put out our hands, shaped in the form of a cross, to receive the only gift that can save us: the promise of God's power and forgiving love.

And as we do so we wait for those moments of utter joy and exhilaration that will carry us through this life – and will enable us to hold on to the vision God has planted in our hearts.

As with the disciples on the mountain, Jesus says to us: *Get up and do not be down-hearted... I have lots more wonderful things to share with you.*