

Year C Sunday before Lent – Transfiguration Sunday

Exodus 34: 29-35

2 Cor 3:12 – 4:2

Luke 9: 28-43

### **Thin Places**

Today, we cannot ignore what has been happening in Ukraine since Thursday evening, or indeed the precursor events that happened with the invasion of Crimea in 2014.

I have friends who are committed pacifists, and I admire their principled approach to conflict, to seeking resolution through dialogue. They may well point to Jesus' sacrifice as a model. Jesus, who chose non-violence as a way of confronting the corrupt systems of dominion and control, of challenging not just the external occupying forces but the role of the Jewish systems of civil and church government in perpetuating injustice and suffering.

However, in the face of a tyrannical leader, a leader without compunction, demanding troops under his authority unleash deadly force on innocent people, and the likely subjugation of a sovereign nation of 44million people, I am not clear that the pacifists approach really works.

So, I wonder what is it that Christians should be praying for and what should we be doing?

Should we demand more talks, with a leader who has cynically used previous talks to push a set of outcomes he knows cannot be accepted by the NATO forces or the UN? Would we be repeating the mistakes of appeasement of the 1930's?

Should we be demanding far tougher sanctions, sanctions that will actually have some effect on the powerbase of the Russian President?

Should we promote a military response, meeting destructive and lethal force with equally destructive lethal force? By equipping Ukraine with weapons and equipment, even at this late stage, is that akin to having troops in the country?

The world has been in similar dilemmas before; humankind's propensity to build up empires and use force to bring others under their economic, political and even religious will, is sadly a common and recurring theme in our history.

In such moments, for me waking up at 5 am on Friday and listening to the BBC World Service news, I did cry out to the Lord for an answer, for an intervention, for some inkling as to how to respond. I can't claim to have heard a clear response, but in the hours afterwards, as I shovelled snow from my front door, as I washed my breakfast dish, as I did the ordinary things at the start of my day, I did come to the settled view that Jesus' message is still one of love, it is still one of loving our neighbour.

In a time of quiet reflection, how does this help, I asked? By showing love and concern for all who are caught up in this evil enterprise is what I felt I was guided to contemplate.

Do the members of the Russian armed forces have much of a choice? They may not have signed up to fight such an unjust conflict. Many will be unwilling pawns themselves, full of fear and foreboding. Despite possibly being fed a frequent diet of false narratives and propaganda as to why they are fighting, many of these troops will have the same concern for themselves, their friends, their families back home as anyone else would have.

Are all people who live in Russia, or are Russian but live elsewhere, or have Russian roots, to be the target of anger and hatred, which may be how some populist papers may portray things? We cannot descend to the level of creating a 'them and us' position for so many innocent people, creating hurts and divisions where none should exist. Reports on Friday showed that some brave Russians publicly protested against the war with Ukraine, despite warnings they would be arrested. No, it is our role as Christians to show them love and compassion. We are to love our neighbour.

In today's gospel reading we reach the point at which Jesus' life changes. From this point on he turns and faces and journeys towards Jerusalem. During the Epiphany season we have seen glimpses of God's kingdom in his early ministry:

- The dove descending at Jesus's baptism
- Turning water into wine
- A fishing net full to bursting of fish

At the Transfiguration, on the mountaintop, Jesus's glory is on full display, as not just his face, but his whole being is shining.

Jesus is there with Moses, who represents the Law. Jesus is there with Elijah, who represents the Prophets. They both seem to bear witness to the identity of Jesus as God's chosen one – words from Isaiah 42:1 – and to affirm the instruction to 'listen to him' - words from Deuteronomy 18:15.

These are words from the Law and from the prophets, as if to underly the presence of Moses and Elijah and what they represent.

This transfiguration is a time of apparent handing over, of a new era. Moses and Elijah are no longer pre-eminent. Jesus is affirmed by God, is transfigured. The era of 'good news' is breaking through and the time of the Law and the Prophets has been completed.

And bless Peter, he tries to capture this time, maybe to try and hold on to it for as long as possible, to contain it in some way, in booths or tabernacles. But, we know, we have the benefit of far more perspective than Peter, that is just isn't possible to contain and limit God; to contain and limit God to the mountain top. God is present, God is engaged, God is active in other places than the mountain top.

So do we need to climb mountains to have an over-whelming experience of God, to have a wonderful moment of knowing we are loved and held by God? To be flooded with God's presence and know that each one of us is a unique child of God?

I have yearned mountain tops and on quite a few occasions I have found them to be 'thin places' indeed. But, really do I need to be a Munro-bagger to get these experiences? The answer is of course, no.

Do I need to seek out known 'thin places', full of spiritual charge and a sense of a mystical divine presence? Well, Iona can be like that, but no, I don't need to go on pilgrimage to a holy site to be in a thin place.

There have been a few occasions when I truly felt like I was being totally wrapped in God's arms and felt like I was beloved. And none were on mountain tops, or in intentionally holy places. One occasion I was resting against a stone wall during a walk one morning, I felt totally protected and loved by God, and for the rest of that day I felt a bodily charge like no other. In trying to describe it, the closest I got was saying it was a bit like that feeling when you fall in love. It left a strong impression on me, and I haven't needed to

try and seek out such experiences again, although I pray I may experience them again.

Less dramatically, I can think of times when I have acted on what I am sure was God's nudging. All were in mundane, every-day settings, in the warp and weft of life, not in a spiritually-charged place, as far as I was aware.

In our gospel reading it ends with a healing, back down from the mountain – a place where Jesus' ministry met the real, sometimes messy and chaotic world. Jesus wasn't called to remain on the mountain, but to rub up against all of humanity, in the towns and villages, in the streets and houses of his world.

We are challenged to see and discern God's presence in our everyday lives. We are challenged to be changed by Jesus, who abides in us, and who we might meet in the guise of a stranger at any time.

I think we are called to keep our eyes open and alert; to discern the sacred on our journey through life. We know that Jesus, our saviour is present everywhere, it's just that we don't often see Him. Are we looking in the wrong places? Are we seldom looking?

On Friday morning, I felt the holy presence guide me in my thinking whilst I was doing the humdrum activities that start my day. It wasn't on a mountain top. It was on a tabletop and on a kitchen counter-top.

I don't know if you have had your own personal transfiguration moment, I am sure many have. May it help you know you are loved and equip you to love your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself.

As we digest the news of events in Ukraine, may we each find ways to follow those two commandments, and not condemn all those who have been drawn into this situation. May we all pray for peace, God's peace.