

SERMON PREACHED AT SJH NEXT BEFORE LENT WEEK 8 YEAR C 3 MARCH 2019

The first floor of the vicarage is in a state of turmoil. For four days an electrician has been carrying out an inspection. That happens every five years, financed by our diocese of Lichfield. He needed to take up some floorboards. That means you have to fold back the carpet. That means you have to move beds, chests of drawers, bookcases and much else. Most of my books are in piles on the landing, which means I cannot find a book of poetry from which I was going to quote in this sermon. Consider yourselves spared!

However, from memory, I have a poem of T.S. Eliot in mind. It's a light-hearted poem with a serious message. He compares the church with a hippopotamus, content just to wallow in water and mud. There are similarities to the Flanders and Swann song. The poem ends with the hippo ascending to heaven and flying around with the angels, whereas the church on earth just continues doing what it's always been doing.

That is in contrast to the picture of God's people presented in today's readings, which is a picture of movement and journey. Let's begin with the New Testament reading, from S. Paul's 2nd letter to the Corinthians. The word 'hope' is in the opening verse. It is a forward looking word. If you read this passage in context it is clear that the Corinthians could hope that their new life in Christ, filled with the Holy Spirit, would be more glorious than the former life some of them had, trying to keep the law given through Moses. The word 'covenant' means a relationship agreed between two parties. Here God is one party, people are the other. Paul declares that the new covenant (Christ and the Spirit) is more glorious than the old covenant (Moses and the law). God's plan of salvation has moved on!

Yet the old covenant had its glory, and Paul sees an example of this in the shining of Moses' face after he had been speaking with God on Mt Sinai. Paul uses his texts quite freely – typical of Rabbis of the time, and some preachers today, I might say. The book of Exodus in the Old Testament describes the Israelites being afraid of Moses' shining face, so for at least some of the time he wore a veil. Paul asserts that the veil stopped people seeing that the shine, the glory, was fading, which he understands as a sign that the glory of the old covenant more generally would fade and would be replaced by the glory of a new covenant.

Moses took off the veil when he entered God's presence, and Paul now develops this idea. He says that we with unveiled faces see the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, and we are

being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. We are becoming like Christ. Movement, journey, change, transformation. Is this our experience, or do we think we're standing still like the earthbound church in the poem? Are our lives increasingly reflecting Christ's glory? I'm sure we know we could all grow in holiness, in prayer and learning more about our faith. It's also about our conduct: treating others with Christian love. Thinking of others, for both the Old Testament writers and for S. Paul, it is in the community that the glory of God is encountered. It is about the wandering Israelites becoming a nation observing God's law; it is about the small group of Christians in Corinth or other places discovering what it means to be the body of Christ. We can help each other individually, but what we do together can shine with God's glory. It is expressed through joint work and worship, which will develop as time goes on.

Today's gospel describes Jesus, Peter, John and James making a journey. They go up a mountain. The disciples see Jesus transfigured or transformed – it's the same word that S. Paul used. The journey motif occurs in another way as well. Moses and Elijah are speaking with Jesus of his departure which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem. The word for 'departure' is actually 'exodus', which means 'way out of'. There is a clear parallel between the deliverance of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the promised land, and the deliverance of Christians from sin to the freedom of eternal life by the death and resurrection of Jesus. He has made the journey for us, and we have made the journey in him. We have become a new people, the people of the new covenant. "This is my blood of the new covenant," said Jesus at the last supper, "Which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins."

Forgiveness and glory are not things we earn by our own efforts. They are given by God shining his light on us. Our rôle is to make that possible, to remove those things from our lives which stop us reflecting his glory, to open our lives to his light, to move into a place where we can receive his grace. At the end of the reading from S. Paul there is mention of renouncing shameful things. That's putting it bluntly. Lent is about to begin. Choosing to give up something is easy in theory. More difficult is to think how we should change so that God can turn us into what he wants us to be. Let's not be stuck where we are.