

Ash Wednesday 2020

Bible Readings:

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Matthew 6:1, 16-18

Caliban, a character from Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* is a complex character and not at all attractive. He is Prospero's slave and frequently referred to by the other characters in the play as a monster. He is both monstrous in appearance and in speech. He is treated in a way that is less than human and he sees himself as less than human. Caliban's world is not however without its beauty. He is not afraid of the enchanted island where he lives and he describes why:

"Don't be scared. This island is full of noises, strange sounds and sweet melodies that make you feel good and don't hurt anyone.

Sometimes I hear a thousand twanging instruments hum at my ears, and sometimes voices that send me back to sleep even if I had just woken up— and then I dreamed of clouds opening up and dropping such riches on me that when I woke up, I cried because I wanted to dream again."

This glimpse of a world of glory and beauty, a world of spirit, is what makes Caliban human and eventually saves him. The conscious mind is not always receptive to dreams and visions. We talk of looking at things in the "cold light of day" and of facing "harsh reality". Last Sunday we remembered when Jesus wanted to lead his three inner disciples beyond the "cold light of the day" and to glimpse a vision of his glory, a glory that was hidden. He chose a place where he could be alone with his friends. We are told that Peter, James and John were heavy with sleep but they woke up and saw his glory.

It was a vision they found hard to understand although as Peter later refers to it in his 2nd letter they certainly never forgot it either. As they came back down the mountain their view of Jesus was different. What they saw in that moment was enough to strike fear and awe into the hearts of those disciples. Their perspective on life would be changed and they would see themselves differently too. In seeing Jesus as he really was they saw themselves as they really were, humbled and inadequate before God. Up on the mountain top they had heard God through the clouds exhort them *"This is my Son Listen to him"*. And so their glimpse of a world beyond themselves, a vision of God's glory, his beauty confirmed their humanity and in time came to save them too.

As they came down the mountain back to their ordinary lives, to the harsh reality of everyday living Peter, James and John came to examine their relationship with Jesus and it changed their relationship with each other. That's what Love does. God's love can give us glimpses of his glory as we see it in our love for another or theirs for us. Our dreams can give us glimpses of glory too. As they speak to us of eternity and the glory of God they change our perspective on whatever harsh reality we may find ourselves living in. They prompt us to be reconciled to each other and to God. Whatever the distance between us we seek to draw closer, to be reconciled and see God's glory in the reconciliation of humankind to God on the cross.

Jesus shows us that it is in our vulnerability that we can be reconciled with God. For his vulnerability on the cross secured our redemption. The disciple John memorably writes in his gospel: *“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.”* And everyone here includes you and me, our neighbours and our enemies. So it is with thoughts of reconciliation in mind that we come together to observe this Ash Wednesday and the beginning of a holy Lent. We come in humility, in self-examination of ourselves and our relationships, in penitence and to restore our relationship, in particular, with God. We mourn for what we have lost and seek restoration from God.

We know from the OT that ashes were traditionally associated with mourning. Job, for example, when he was smitten with various ills and was at his lowest point repented in dust and ashes. To repent in dust and ashes was a sign of mourning, repenting and humbling ourselves before God, starting on a fresh path, a fresh journey with God and each other. So in this service as we come to receive the ashing we acknowledge our mortality and we hear the words *“Remember that you are dust and unto dust you shall return. Turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ”*.

For Christians, Ash Wednesday is an important occasion in the year when we remember our humanity and acknowledge too our mortality. For our generation that is a harder message as we live longer thanks to health and medical science we have

come to shun death preferring to think of ourselves as living for ever, a life that has no end. As I have listened and prayed with those nearing the end of their lives I frequently find that it is those who fear death the most who often deny it. And it is the traditional task of the priest to prepare people for their death, to reconcile them with their maker. Mortality currently runs as it always has at 100% but as Christians we believe that death is merely the gateway to a fuller more perfect life, an immortality won through the death and resurrection of Jesus. So as we acknowledge our own unworthiness we mark ourselves with the sign of the cross, a statement to all of our humility and faith in our Lord's death on the cross.

We will leave church today marked with the sign of the cross. The last time you did this most significantly was probably at your baptism as a sign of Christ claiming you for his own. But as the cross is marked on our foreheads in ashes this time more poignantly, it is a reminder of the power of the cross in the harshness of everyday living. Christ is at work in the world through you and me reconciling the world and all of his creation to himself. Live Lent, the C of E Lent campaign this year which I commend to you, encourages us to care for God's creation, for in that reconciliation too we shall see God's glory. And today we wish each other a good Lent, a more holy Lent and remind each other that we carry the sign of the cross even when it's dirt is no longer visible, a sign that we make time on our Lenten journey to hear, study and learn afresh the meaning of God's exhortation to us from the clouds to his disciples: *“This is my Son Listen to him”*.

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