

## The Fifth Sunday after Trinity

### Luke 10. 38-42

Streets full of people, all alone  
Rows full of houses, never home  
Church full of singing, out of tune  
Everyone's gone to the moon.

Thus Jonathan King moodily strumming along from Cambridge in 1965. And fifty years ago, of course, someone did go the Moon. Those iconic, grainy pictures of Neil Armstrong descending the ladder from the Lunar Excursion Module, Eagle, and uttering those epoch-making words: 'That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind' is probably the most emblematic and enduring image from the twentieth century. It's certainly one of them, a where were you when...? moment.

However, in terms of the actual science that was done with the Apollo programme, the Moon landings were a bit of a dud, a cul-de-sac. Yes, it was momentous getting those Moon rocks back to Earth, but now robots fly off to Mars on a regular basis and scoop up the Martian dust with great alacrity. In terms of actual science done, the Cassini project to Saturn revealed far more about planetary evolution and has brought closer the intriguing possibility of determining whether there is life on another world (on one of Saturn's moons, Enceladus). As we know, the Apollo project was aborted after Apollo 17, in December 1972, and a human being hasn't been back to the Moon since.

And yet, those images *are* emblematic. I am not a betting man, but I wouldn't mind supposing that the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the launch of Voyager in 1977, or the Cassini probe in 1997 will attract nothing like the attention Man landing on the Moon has done, even though the science these two unmanned probes have revealed has been extraordinary. You see, nothing is quite the same as a human being actually going there and doing it themselves. As Buzz Aldrin said after Apollo 11 returned to Earth, the Apollo mission was a 'symbol of the insatiable curiosity of all mankind to explore the unknown.' Robots can scoop up soil, but they cannot *touch*, they cannot *feel*. And that is what makes the difference. We can give high fives in Mission Control when the technology works, but there is something much more unquantifiable when a human being does it. It is a sublime moment, a moment of transfiguration.

There were protests at the time of the Apollo missions, righteous protests, about the amount of money being spent on something that was almost a vanity project. Just think of how many poor people could be fed for the amount of money spent on space missions. Undeniably true. It is also true that the incentive to put man on the Moon was driven as much by Cold War politics than by human endeavour.

However, you cannot stop people being curious, from discovering what is out there. Besides, we all need moments like Neil Armstrong planting his foot on the lunar landscape in order to elevate that curiosity into moments of enduring value. *This* is what we can do! In the same way, looking at a Rembrandt will not put food on the table, but how many of us have stood before one of his self-portraits or before his sublime work *The Jewish Bride* and not been moved to tears by the experience? Listening to *The Goldberg Variations* will not cure someone of cancer, but may well give them an insight into the unfathomable reaches of what it means to be creative, and how we can express the inexpressible in a way that profit and loss accounts can never do.

This is what I mean by a transfigurative moment, when the ordinary becomes extraordinary, when the prosaic becomes poetic. It is a releasing from the constraints that hold us, and opens up new insights, new ways of being human. It is, of course, what happened to Mary as she sat at the feet of Jesus; it is something that Martha could not quite get hold of, submerged as she was in the prosaic world of the daily routine. It is something that Jesus revealed in essence on the mountain when his form was transfigured, a feast we celebrate on the 6<sup>th</sup> August.

I am slightly disappointed, then, when we don't use transfiguring as a spiritual experience more often. Instead, the buzz word the Church tends to use for the kind of thing I am describing is not transfiguring, but transformation. We talk about transforming society, transforming mission, and anything else we want to try and change. But I freely confess I do not like that word, well in this context at any rate. You see, when we talk about transformation we talk about, not being elevated to a greater awareness of reality, which is what I take transfiguration to be, but changing from one kind of thing to another, as if what we have now, what we *are* now, is not really fit for purpose, and *needs* to change.

But I don't want to become something or someone else. God made me as I am, in the form that I have. For me to be transformed is almost to repudiate how God made me. It doesn't mean for one iota that I don't have to change, but it does mean that I am not seeking a transforming into something else. The grace of God can be imparted, experienced and absorbed without me having to become something else. And the evidence for that is borne out in today's Gospel.

Mary, for instance, was not transformed into somebody else by sitting at the feet of Jesus. She was transfixed by him, and I would like to think that she may well have found it a transfiguring experience. But I bet when Jesus had finished his teaching, she actually did get off the floor and give a hand with the washing up. And, you never know, her experience of that moment, that being with Jesus just might have persuaded her to live her life differently, not by repudiating what had gone on before, renouncing who she was in a desperate attempt to transform herself into

something else, but allowing the *presence* of who she was to be overcome by the glory of God in Jesus, which is what a transfiguring experience is.

Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin were not transformed into other people, but their experience of walking on the Moon, as it was for the other few who did this, was life-enhancing and, to use my preferred word, transfiguring. They not only left the bounds of Earth physically, but spiritually as well, which, to me, is the sign of a transfigured experience. (That experience doesn't always lead to what you might think are expected results: whilst Buzz Aldrin has become quite a prominent figure, talking about his faith and the impact the Moon landings had on him, Armstrong became quite a reclusive figure, not talking about his experiences that much.)

This is the way our experience of God works, or should work. When I hear *The Goldberg Variations*, yes, I am transported into another realm, and it can seem as if I have become detached from the reality of where I am. But this doesn't mean I have become another creature, a something else. I am still me! and when the music stops I return to the quotidian realities of life, and I deal with the here and now, although, you never know, I might just approach that reality differently as a result of having had that transfigurative experience.

Of course, this cannot be contrived. There is no penny in the slot machine which orchestrates such experiences. This is because they are grace-filled, flickerings of the reality of God peppering our lives in which we get a sense of the Other in the midst of us, those goosebumps, that tingling at the top of the spine which says to us that we are being moved by something, or someone, outside of ourselves, pulling us by its magnetic force towards itself. It may not be permanent, it may not last long, but it is real, it is palpable.

Which is why we don't go gooey over a robot on the surface of Mars but can still be arrested by grainy pictures of Neil Armstrong getting off a ladder. Why we can rationally analyse why certain minerals make certain colours, but then are awestruck how those colours are combined by a Dutchman who had a lifelong fixation about painting himself. Why we can dispassionately look at notes on a score and analyse the way they move one to the other, but then are moved to tears when we actually *hear* the opening of the *Goldberg Variations*. Why Mary couldn't move when Jesus was talking, whilst Martha fussed around them with her duster. All these are moments of transfiguration, moments when we leave the Earth's pull and journey, no matter how briefly, heavenward. Grace-filled moments when we know we are held by Someone other than ourselves, an experience where a small step, indeed, does become a giant leap.