

## The Sunday before Lent

27 February 2022

In 1992, just thirty years ago, a mere blink in global history terms, the American political scientist, Francis Fukuyama, wrote a book called *The End of History*. In it, he interpreted the collapse of the Soviet Union, which was signed out of existence by Mikhail Gorbachev on 26 December 1991, as the vindication of western, liberal democratic values, and that two centuries of political experimentation, kick-started by the French Revolution, had culminated in those values as the ‘final form’ of human government. The future was golden, The future was western.

It was difficult at the time not to agree. I well remember people sledge-hammering the Berlin Wall in 1989, exactly two centuries after the walls of the Bastille were similarly sledge-hammered, and that vast rainbow ark of authority, from aristocratic monarchies to the birth of industrial societies, to the imposition of fascist and communist dictatorships, and their subsequent collapse, had at last revealed the pot of gold of the triumph of liberal democracy, even though, it has to be said, those democracies don’t always live out the values they claim to espouse.

Thirty years later and the aspirations of Fukuyama’s clarion call now lie trodden in the tank tracks of the Ukraine. Vladimir Putin, and other strong-men leaders in places like China, Brazil and Turkey, obviously didn’t bother seeing the Netflix adaptation of *The End of History*, because they flex their authoritarian biceps with impunity, stick two fingers up to lauded, western sensibilities, and, in Putin’s case, embarrass a series of western leaders who have queued up to sit at one end of Putin’s ridiculously long table in the Kremlin, while he sits proudly at the other, trying to persuade him not to take military action, something he had already determined to do, ending up, it has to be said, looking faintly ridiculous themselves. The triumph of western liberal democracy? Go on, says Putin, you’re having a laugh.

Well, funny it isn’t. Whilst I am not going to pretend to be an amateur strategic pundit, I am going to say that we are living in dangerous times, and it can seem hard to stand before you to try and extrapolate some form of religious lesson from what we are seeing on our television screens. The world does tend to oscillate between good times and bad, and the confidence of the 1990s now seems like a distant echo; it feels a bit more like the 1930s, with all the tensions that this creates.

However, this is precisely the right time to talk about our faith and our commitment to the Gospel, for it is in adversity that we often see the contours of the shape of the Gospel more clearly than when things are going just fine. The baser actions of humanity give the implications of our faith commitment a much stronger resonance.

And so, in talking about a faith commitment to the events of last week, I want to refer to two trips up the mountain that Jesus made. Mountains have strong symbolic

importance in the Bible. They are thin places, places where God is found. So, when Jesus goes up a mountain, you know something important is going to happen.

Firstly, Jesus goes up the mountain to preach the Sermon on the Mount. Located in Matthew's Gospel, this is his first direct statement of intent, and what a statement it is. Launched by the Beatitudes, it is a direct challenge to the prevailing *religious* tradition, let alone political one, a radical re-orientation of a person's faith, in that actions without an inner conviction that what you are doing is right is so much wasted energy, whilst recognising that the very presence of that inner conviction demands action to be taken. Religion is not just a fuzzy feeling, it's also about living out God's righteousness on earth.

And as for the second trip up the mountain, well we have the Lucan version of that in today's Gospel; the time that Jesus is transfigured before his closest disciples. Now, I am not going to bang on again today – too much – about the difference between transformation and transfiguration, except to say – and you wouldn't expect me not to say *something* about that difference, would you? – that Jesus is *transfigured*, he is not transformed: he doesn't become someone or something else; it is still him, glowing, for want of a better word, with the presence of God emanating from within. The clue is in the title, which is why I see transfiguration, in contrast to transformation, as a higher, again for want of a better word, indication of God's presence in our lives.

Be that as it may, this story has had various interpretations grafted on to it, a key one being the belief that it was a post-resurrection story of Jesus plonked into the middle of the Gospel to show that, no matter what happened later on in the Jesus story, his resurrection means that everything would be alright in the end. To me, this denies the core significance of the story. The attestation that Jesus was transfigured in the time of his ministry tells me that it is *that ministry*, the time when Jesus was woven into the textures and fabrics of the lives of the people around him, which is capable of being transfigured; transfiguration is not just something for the resurrected, parachuted back in time to reassure quaking disciples that all's well that end's well. It is something for the here and now, amidst the exigencies of life, and not just the star prize at the end of life's journey.

It is the here and now that is transfigured on the mountain top, not the future state of Jesus's being. Underlining this is the location of the transfiguration story in the course of the Gospel narrative. For all three synoptic evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke (John doesn't have the story), the transfiguration is bookended by predictions of Jesus's suffering and death. He *knows* things are not going to end well, and in spite of that, he is transfigured, the pending suffering and death does not limit the potential for Jesus to reveal the glory of God from *within* that suffering. Hence the transfiguration's place in our lectionary, the Sunday before Lent begins.

Actually, it shouldn't be in spite of; it should be because of. Transfiguration amidst suffering is a more telling indication of God's presence in our lives, than transfiguration when things are going tickety-boo. And here the two mountain stories, to me, are

linked. The Beatitudes, that overturning of conventional religious habits and mores, are the seedbeds of transfigured glory: Blessed are the poor, those who mourn, the meek, the hungry, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemaker, the persecuted, the reviled: all will receive rewards in heaven, not because they put up with terrible things on this earth, but because they are able to demonstrate, through their lives of faith, that the living of a life which challenges the proud, the mighty and the rich, those earmarked in the Magnificat, has the potential to transfigure humanity from a determined recourse to invasion, to injustice, to trampling underfoot the innocent and the lame, into something higher, more obviously godly and glorious.

Jesus was transfigured because he realised that potential to its fullest extent. After all, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemaker only exist because their opposites, the merciless, the corrupt in heart, the warmaker abound in our fallen state. This was why he got up the noses of the rich and powerful, because his Beatitude life challenged the very essence of perverted humanity. This was why he knew that the sign of that potential, his transfiguration, was bracketed by predictions of his suffering and death.

I hope you can see how this can be applied to our current situation. As I say, humanity tends to oscillate between good times and bad. We need not be too idealistic about the early 1990s; the 'triumph' of liberal western democracy, if that is what happened, did not lead to a return to Eden. The values of liberal western democracy *per se* do not embody the values of the Beatitudes, and we can all think of examples where the worm in the bud of those values turned the apple rotten; we may, as a society, have certain freedoms, but we are not unsullied. However, the world is darker today than it was last week, and the tanks of the despotic are once more on the move.

And yet, and yet, our response should be to try and ensure that our Beatitude values are never more lived out than they are now. Yes, we are surrounded by predictions of grimness and danger; the world is less safe in all sorts of ways than it has been for decades. But if we are true to our calling, all of us, then we have the potential to be open to that calling, to be peacemakers, to be pure of heart, to be poor in spirit, and, yes, to be reviled and perhaps persecuted because we know in standing for these values, we confront the tank and the jackboot. We may not stop the forces of war in their tracks, but we will signal that such actions will never have the last word.

We need to demonstrate the calling of Jesus. We need to call out the injustice of war. We need to live lives wrestling with what it means to be Blessed. We need to open ourselves up to the power of the Spirit, so that we too are transfigured by our peacefulness, our pureness in heart and our mercy, and that this is something that needs to happen, not just on the remotest mountain, but in the missile-scarred apartment block, the refugee-crammed train and on the protesters' placard. The route Jesus took to transfigured glory is ours as well.