

The Sunday before Lent is a pivotal moment, as we move from the joy of Christmas and Epiphany to a more sombre and reflective season. It also interrupts our journey with Jesus and his followers around the shores of Galilee and takes us about 15 miles to Mount Tabor, which by tradition is the site of the Transfiguration. From Mount Tabor you can look out over the fertile valley of Jezreel and its strategic position means that it has been much fought over, in Old Testament times, in Jewish rebellions against Rome shortly before and after the time of Jesus and in to and fro battles between Crusaders and Muslims. The imposing Church of the Transfiguration was built in the early 20th century by Franciscans on the site of a Crusader church, which itself was built on the ruins of a 5th century Byzantine church.

Our celebration of Epiphany – the revealing of Christ – started with the visit of the wise men to the stable and continued through Jesus' baptism and calling of his disciples to his revelation as a prophet, healer and teacher of authority in the synagogues and homes of Galilee. Now it reaches its ultimate expression in the Transfiguration. Jesus' clothes are supernaturally white; he is endorsed by the presence of Moses and Elijah, towering figures from the Old Testament; God speaks from a cloud proclaiming Jesus to be his Son. The disciples are awestruck, terrified (who wouldn't be?). It's an amazing experience, one to treasure, even if Peter's fervent wish to perpetuate it was rejected by Jesus.

But it will all change on Ash Wednesday. Like Peter's, our euphoria is short-lived. And so our Collect reflects on these contrasting themes with three petitions.

'Almighty Father,' it begins, 'whose Son was revealed in majesty before he suffered death upon the cross: *give us grace to perceive his glory*'. At certain times of the day, which differ according to the season, you can sit in the chancel of our church and be bathed in beautiful shafts of coloured light as the sun streams in through the stained glass. It's a real glimpse of God's glory, a moment of wonder. How else might we 'perceive his glory'? Perhaps in the faces of people we meet, in simple acts of kindness, in the extraordinary stories of bravery and devotion which are so evident in our current situation.

And, of course, in the beauty of the natural world, the continuing joy of creation as new lives begin, a work of art or piece of music which moves us.

But these experiences are of little use if they are merely self-indulgent, as Peter discovered. Why do we ask for grace? The Collect continues, *'that we may be strengthened to suffer with him.'* This is difficult, as we don't tend to look for suffering. But if we continue to read chapter 9 of Mark's gospel we see Jesus plunging back into human existence, where there is illness and injustice and evil, whether man made or beyond our control. Sharing in the suffering of Jesus and of the world he came to save is an inevitable part of sharing his glory.

Thirdly the Collect asks that we may *'be changed into his likeness, from glory to glory.'* This petition anticipates the Easter message of resurrection hope: Christ will conquer death, sin and evil – the ultimate victory will be his – and our hope is to share fully in that victory, so that we become like Christ.

On the threshold of Lent we are called to become more Christlike. Lent is a time to take stock as we focus on discipleship in a world of suffering. But we do so against the backdrop of the revealed glory of God and with the assurance of Easter ahead of us.

It is with this background that we launch our Lent programme, titled 'God's story, our story'. It's an opportunity to plunge in to God's story, the most wonderful story of all. A story which on the one hand is like our own, full of people like us. But, on the other hand, it tells us about a God we can hardly grasp.

We are invited to take part in God's story and to make it so much part of our own stories that our own lives become impossible to understand without it. And then to be tellers of this story, and the change it has brought to us, to those who fear all they will ever have is their own drama.

The booklet for this course is available in church but we'd be very happy to deliver it to your home – just drop me or Helen a line. It contains a daily reading, a reflection and a prayer (and these are also available electronically via e-mail or an App.). The reflections follow weekly themes and we'll be looking deeper into these during our Lent lunches via Zoom. Please join us!

Charles