

THE TRANSFIGURATION

LAST SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY, YEAR A - 6th March 2011 Responsibility: Canon Barlow

At last we come to the end of the Epiphany Season - this year the longest, with today being the ninth Sunday after January 6th, "The Epiphany of our Lord", or the 12th day of Christmas. The number of Sundays after the Epiphany depends upon whether Easter Day is early or late. Christmas Day is of course a fixed date. The date of Easter Day fluctuates according to a complex formula, and may vary from March 22nd to April 24th. This formula was printed in the introductory pages of the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, and also in the 1928 revision. It has been dropped from subsequent revisions, probably because nobody ever bothered with it, relying instead on the readily available lectionary, which is produced every year and sets out the Prayers and Readings for every day of the year.

Does all this stuff matter? Can't we just read a couple of slabs of Holy Scripture; pray a bit; and sing whatever hymns we like? Well, yes, it does matter. It makes for an orderly and ordered system of reading and hearing the Scriptures throughout the year. By this system we follow our Lord's life and teaching in a chronological way: from His birth at Christmas-tide; His manifestation or being recognised as the Christ, first to the Magi at the Epiphany, then at His baptism, and then to all who would follow Him. Thence to Ash Wednesday and the four Sundays of Lent; to Good Friday depicting His death; to Easter Day, celebrating His resurrection; and on to Whitsunday or Pentecost and the action of the Holy Spirit coming firstly to the apostles and then to all His followers, and available to us.

If we are thoughtful about all this, our prayers, readings and hymns will reflect the mood of the occasions. For preachers too, there is a challenge to lead the worshippers to meditate on the theme for the day, and not go off on a favourite topic which may or may not have anything to do with that theme. On this Last Sunday after the Epiphany we have placed before us the final words of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, which began with the Beatitudes in chapter 5 of St. Matthew's Gospel, and covers all of chapters 5, 6 and 7. Having heard that teaching, we have placed before us two choices, with a dire warning for us if we choose the wrong one. Jesus portrays the contrast between "the way that leads to destruction" and "the way that leads to life". Verse 13, just before the start of today's Reading, advises: "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it". The two gates represent two kinds of life, and those who live these lives are thought of as either wolves or sheep; as good trees or bad trees; those who are all talk and no action, and those who do the will of God; those who hear Jesus' words and act upon them, and those who only hear.

The idea of two gates is common in the Old Testament, with which many of our Lord's hearers would be familiar, as in the Book Deuteronomy: "I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil", (30:15). And in Jeremiah: "I set before you the way of life and the way of death" (21:8). Everyone has the power to choose between the only two possible ways of living - one of which ends in destruction and the other in life. Exactly what that literally means, we cannot yet know, but by the time we do find out, it will be too late. But for sure the former means to be cut off from God - the much easier way and which

regrettably is taken by many. The other means to be with God, and sadly "only a few find it". As there are two gates, so there are two kinds of teacher, or leader, Jesus is saying, one promising the easy way and the other the hard way. Here again is a parallel in the Old Testament teaching about true prophets and false prophets. They seem to be members of the Church, "in sheep's clothing, but are in fact ferocious wolves". Even by the time of St. John the Evangelist's writing to the young Church, false teachers were appearing and leading people from the true Faith: how was the ordinary Christian to know which was the true prophet and which the false? (John 2:18-) And the Church today has the same problem as people have since the beginning: people have come to disagree with the teaching of the traditional time- and experience-- tested Faith of the Church: One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic, with which we profess to believe in every formal church service.

The picture of the contrast between the sheep and the wolves is then changed for that of the sound tree and the bad one: the fruit is the only way of determining the usefulness or otherwise of the tree. And for an orchardist this is very important - a poor-fruited tree must be removed and replaced. Love, and its consequences or good works, is the test for distinguishing between a faithful and an unfaithful leader, and indeed follower. Earlier, in chapter 3 of this Gospel, when we read of John the Baptist coming out of the desert of Judea to proclaim the imminent coming of the Messiah, he warned the leaders of the nation: "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance ...every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire". (3:8,10) A fiery preacher was John the Baptist! But Jesus was not just attacking the leaders, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, although He did accuse them of being false prophets: this was for all who came to hear the Sermon on the Mount: "Now when He saw the crowds, He went up on a hillside and sat down. His disciples came to Him, and He began to teach them." (5:1,2) So that draws us in also, if we want to be His disciples, choosing the narrow gate; being faithful sheep, not ferocious wolves; being fruitful trees, and not just a waste of space. And Jesus concludes the Sermon on the Mount: Everyone who hears this teaching, and acts upon it, will be like the wise man who built his house on the rock. Come what may, his house - his life - will stand. The unwise man builds on the loose and shifting sand, and when tragedy, disaster, the trials of life come, his comfort zone will be washed away. "And the crowds were amazed at the teaching" (V.28)

Perhaps we are not particularly amazed, because we have heard it all before, and have become somewhat blasé about it. Pause, and consider the deep implications this has for us. "For Jesus taught as one who had authority", (v.29)

AMEN

FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT - Year A – 13th March 2011

Responsibility: Canon Barlow

[Based on the Gospel for today viz. Matthew 4:1-11]

"Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him: If you are the Son of God..... " (4:1&2)

It is customary on the first Sunday in Lent to have for the Gospel Reading the account of our Lord's temptations in the wilderness, just before He began His active ministry. In the 3-year cycle we have the version recorded by St. Matthew this year, by St. Mark next year, and by St. Luke the year after next: just enough because there is no account in the 4th Gospel, St. John's. All differ so little that we may conclude that Jesus must have told the story of His temptations to His disciples. And of course, there was no-one else there!

Following His baptism by John the Baptist, it is not surprising that His next step was a temporary withdrawal into solitude. For Jesus it was a time to face and solve a personal problem. How was this new vocation, of which the events at His baptism had made Him aware, to be carried through? Presenting as it would, situations as full of menace as of opportunity.

Some courses of action might suggest themselves with plausible appeal. He might gain power by doing homage to the devil, or as modern man might express it, by exploiting the latent forces of violence to free His people from the tyranny of Rome. He might win the loyalty of the masses by feeding them - some Caesars of Rome did just that to stave off the discontent of the masses by feeding them and amusing them with "bread and circuses". As indeed do politicians of today! He might captivate the multitude by exhibitions of miracles - for example as Satan suggested by throwing Himself off the parapet of the Temple and challenging God to intervene. But no, His mission would be guided by three basic principles, stated in the three replies He gave to Satan's suggestions. They are: obedience to the will of God ("One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."); trust in God which asks no proof ("Do not put the Lord your God to the test."); and a dedicated allegiance to God, which excludes all lesser claims ("Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.")

The temptations in the desert were of course not our Lord's only temptations. Again and again, all through His life on earth, right up to His death on the cross, He must have come up against the temptations of everyday life. As you read the Gospels with imagination, it is not difficult to see plenty of times when Jesus was put to the test. For instance St. John records (6:15) that the crowds were about to come and take Him by force and make Him king, but He quietly took off for the hills, literally. In the Garden of Gethsemane, knowing that Judas had betrayed Him, and that the shame and the agony of the cross lay before Him, Jesus must have realized how easy it would be to slip away in the darkness. He even prayed: "Father, if it be possible, let this cup (of suffering) pass from me." (26:39). And how hard to resist the taunt: "If you really are the Son of God, come down from the cross, and then we will believe in you." (Matt.27:40) It surely strengthens and encourages us as we face our own temptations, to remember

that Jesus too, as truly man, faced temptations - and not only the few recorded, but without doubt many others that we can only imagine.

At this point we might ask: "Where do temptations come from?" and be dissatisfied with the reply "From the devil." Is there a devil? It is not a popular subject of debate, and we might be thought to be a bit simplistic if we say "Yes there is., particularly these days when we know something of the weird things which go on in people's minds. The early Creation stories portray the devil as a serpent. Cartoonists portray him in long red underwear sort of gear, with horns, tail, and trident. Once that did instil fear into people's hearts. Today it is simply ridiculous - but it is very clever, devilish, camouflage that. Ridicule something, and fear soon goes. Hitler's Charlie Chaplin moustache, and Mussolini's heavy underslung jaw were used this way in World War 2 propaganda to allay the fears of the people and to stiffen their resolve - they just couldn't be afraid of people like that!

It is true that a visible devil in human form or something like it, is hard to believe in. But the Gospels do not suggest that the devil made a visible appearance. The details of the Temptations of Jesus strongly suggest that they took the form of thoughts passing through His mind. For instance, there is no mountain from which can be seen "all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour." Yet, if we do reject a visible devil, we must be careful that this does not lead us to reject the devil altogether. In all the sin and wickedness of the world today there is much to suggest a great force of evil at work influencing mankind for bad. The greatest evil in the non-medical use of drugs is not merely the damage it does physically, but that it leaves the intellect wide open to the influence of Satan. There is plenty of evidence to support this belief, although the news media would hardly express it that way.

At first sight, our Lord's three temptations don't seem to be very relevant to us and our situations; that there is nothing to parallel them in the things that happen to us at home or work or in the various spheres of our daily life. But when you think about them, they're not so different, and in fact are a fair summary of all the temptations which come our way.

When He was tempted to turn stones into bread, Jesus was being tempted to solve what was for Him the problem of the moment in a quick but wrong way. Isn't it true that when we have some pressing need or grave crisis, we are tempted to seek a quick and immediate solution in a way which we feel might not really be God's way but we can excuse ourselves because we are using the way out just this once, in special circumstances. When Jesus thought of leaping off the top of the Temple He was being tempted to take a short cut to fame. Part of His task on earth was to lead people from evil to good, but to do this He first had to capture their imagination, to win their interest. What better way than by a sensational miracle right at the place which was the centre of the religious life of the nation! Much quicker and easier than toiling and teaching up and down the length and breadth of the country. Are not many selfish or underhand actions done because they are thought to be shortcuts to prosperity or success? The third temptation was to make a bargain. By adopting the devil's methods He could make Himself a dictator greater than Caesar, or Napoleon, or Hitler, or Stalin or any leader the world has ever known. How often we are offered similar bargains - not for world power perhaps, but for the fulfilment of lesser desires:

success, riches, popularity, pleasure. We can get what we want by using the devil's methods too. There are plenty of sad stories in the press about people who have tried them and come to grief.

The story of our Lord's temptations in the wilderness is a strange one, in a strange setting. But as we meditate upon them, and see the underlying similarities to our own, we are able to face ours with the patience, courage, and inner strength of **Jesus as** we place our trust and faith in Him. We may build up our power of resistance if we live our lives in the spirit of our Lord's rebuff to the Tempter: living by the word of God; not putting God to the test; worshipping the Lord our God, and Him only.

"Just as one man's trespass (Adam's) led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness (Jesus') leads to justification and life for all." (Rom.5:19) AMEN

SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT Year A – 20th March 2011 Responsibility: Canon Barlow

Based on John 3 (alternate Gospel)

The episode concerning the theological discussion between Nicodemus and Jesus put before us as the Gospel Reading for today, is not recorded in any of the other Gospels. It is quite unique. It is unique also in that it records a theological discussion between Jesus and a leader of the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin, who were more intent on getting rid of this disturbing young man rather than listening to him.

The incident follows the cleansing of the Temple, when the outrageous behaviour of Jesus challenged the authorities of the Church and the Nation, and publicly denounced them as a den of thieves. We may be sure that the actions of this fiery young prophet, and the sensation he had caused in the Temple was a hot topic of conversation at every dinner-table in Jerusalem that evening. And no doubt the incident would have initiated some deep thinking among many who were not altogether happy about the self-satisfied religious leaders, and the political situation of the day. St. John selected one prominent instance to record. "Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night." The symbolism "by night" would have appealed to John: not only would the man not want to be seen by his colleagues, but John would see him coming in from the darkness of ignorance to the light of the knowledge of Christ, who he knew to be the Light of the World. We can imagine John sitting in the room with them, and listening and remembering something of the conversation which he would later record for the benefit of future followers, like us. He learned that Nicodemus wanted to hear about this Kingdom of God which Jesus had come to establish, holding as he did the popular understanding and expectation about the Messiah and his reign. He expected, as did everyone else, an earthly kingdom of glory and prosperity for Israel. Every Israelite would of course be a member of it by birthright. Probably Nicodemus hoped that Jesus might turn out to be the very Messiah promised. Being an older man, and experienced, and holding high status in Judaism, Nicodemus might have even thought that his advice and influence might be of value to the young enthusiast who had behaved so recklessly that morning. And so he addresses the young man with deep respect: "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no-one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God" - he'd obviously heard of Jesus' miracles. Jesus abruptly cuts across with the rather mystifying pronouncement: "Very truly I tell you, no-one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above." To belong to the Kingdom of God means very much more than merely being born a member of the Jewish race. This is no kingdom of earthly power and politics and privilege. This is a kingdom of faithful souls, of men and women deeply devoted to the worship and service of Almighty God. To be born again, born from above, born of the Spirit, is to receive a fresh start, a new beginning, utterly dedicated to God.

"I don't understand", says Nicodemus, "how can anyone be born after having grown old?" It shouldn't have been a problem - the idea of spiritual rebirth was not strange to a Jew. A Gentile received into Judaism was thought of as being reborn, for instance. Jesus did not try to explain the "how". Instead he appealed to the man's own experience. "You know the difference between the earthly and the

spiritual, between the earthly-minded person who lives for the things of this world, and the spiritually-minded person whose heart is set on God. What is born of flesh is flesh and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. The influence of God's Spirit is as free as the wind. The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Nicodemus gives up. "How can these things be?" Jesus takes him up: "Are you a teacher in Israel and yet you do not understand these things? If you can't understand the simple fact that it requires God's Spirit to make a person spiritual, how will you believe when I tell you of deeper heavenly mysteries? Because only I can tell them - no-one ever ascended into heaven for this knowledge, only the Son of Man. You have many more surprising things to learn before you can understand me and my Kingdom. I am not coming, as you think, to a princely throne to show God's power, but to a shameful cross, to show God's self-sacrifice." And he drew a comparison between his own being lifted up on a cross for the salvation of the people with the incident during the Exodus when venomous snakes attacked the people, who were saved when Moses had a snake made out of bronze lifted on a pole for all to see. (Number 21)

Imagine the state of mind of the elderly rabbi as he listened. Here is this obscure young carpenter, without great learning, without recognition by the Church, quietly and unselfconsciously claiming to be from heaven and to know the will of God and to be the Light of the world and the source of eternal life.

And that's as far as John's record of the conversation goes. It's not clear whether that wonderful final paragraph is part of Jesus' statement, or John's own editorial comment. Either way it is a great statement of our faith, and a great consolation when things in life appear to be against us. That God loves the world - this world with its tsunamis, earthquakes, bush-fires, floods, droughts - and its human inhabitants - loves the world which is so much in rebellion yet containing so much loveliness and possibility and opportunity and hopefulness. That God so loved the world that He became Incarnate - became Man - so that we who believe in Him may have eternal life, and not perish. No force, just the opportunity held out to us to grasp, or to reject.

Not all the learning of a theologian, or the virtues of a godly life, or the privilege of belonging to the chosen people can put a person right with God. Only by constant attention to the words of Jesus; by standing humbly at the foot of the cross - the place of healing as in the story of the lifted-up brass serpent - and by accepting the forgiveness of God when we make mistakes can we know what it means to have eternal life. It was for this that God sent His Son into the world - not to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him.

A last glimpse of Nicodemus. We don't know what effect all this had on him, whether he understood or whether he went away still mystified. But he kept his eye on Jesus. One time when the chief priests and Pharisees were planning to arrest Jesus, Nicodemus mildly defended him. "Does our law condemn anyone without first hearing him to find out what he is doing?" (John7:51) And they didn't go on with it. And later, after the crucifixion, he with another disgruntled Pharisee, Joseph of Aramathea,

saw to the burial of the body of Jesus - Joseph provided the tomb and Nicodemus the burial spices. Together they wrapped the body in linen strips and sealed off the tomb with a boulder .(John 19:39)
Jesus said to Nicodemus: "No-one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above." Born from above; born of the Spirit. And many years later John wrote to the Church in his first Epistle: "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves, has been born of God and knows God. (1 John 4:7)

So let us rejoice that we are God's children, born anew as we acknowledge Jesus as the Christ, the Saviour, and able to worship and serve Him in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT Year A – 27th March 2011 Responsibility: Canon Barlow [Based on the Gospel for today viz. John 4:5-42]

Jesus said: "Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." (John 4:140)

The Holy Land is a country with a climate rather like our own, only perhaps even more extreme because it all happens in a relatively small area. There are mountains in the north which have snow on them, and to the south and east are desert wildernesses. Like in our own country, in many places water is a precious commodity, so it is not really surprising to find mention in Holy Scripture, not merely of the need for water but also seeing in water a great symbolism. Water is vital for life. It is also necessary for cleanliness. The step to using water in ceremonies referring to spiritual growth and spiritual cleanness is not a difficult one. Hence baptism was a ceremony of spiritual cleansing long before our Lord made it an essential Sacrament. The Psalmist wrote in Psalm 26: "I wash my hands in innocence, O Lord, that I may go about your altar." And in Psalm 51: "Wash me thoroughly from my wickedness, and cleanse me from my sin."

In the early stories of the Book Genesis, the world was cleansed by the Great Flood, and Noah and his family were saved because he heeded God's warning and built the Ark. In the Book Exodus the fleeing Israelites were saved when the waters of the Red Sea receded. They were able to pass through, but then the tide came in and the wind changed and their enemies were caught and drowned. In this morning's Old Testament Reading we heard of the life-preserving water given from the rock in the desert. Life preserving, cleansing water. No wonder Jesus spoke of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in a believer as "living water". "If you knew the gift of God," He said to that Samaritan woman at Jacob's Well, "and who it is that is saying to you 'Give me a drink', you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."

As today, travelling in the Holy Land in our Lord's day was a precarious business. As today Arabs avoid Israeli territory, and vice versa, even if passports and visas are obtainable, so then Jews avoided the area of Samaria, making a long detour rather than risk trouble. It was an historic enmity, somewhat like that in Ireland between Roman Catholics and Protestants - originally stemming from religious and political problems, but now a matter of unreasoning bigotry and blind prejudice.

On His journeys between His home province of Galilee in the north and Jerusalem in the south, Jesus did not always make the detour, and it is possible that He deliberately chose at times to pass through Samaria with the hope of breaking down the barrier between His own people and the Samaritans. On one occasion He sent the brothers James and John on ahead to seek overnight accommodation in a Samaritan village. It was refused, apparently rather tersely, and James and John, nicknamed the Sons of Thunder, probably because of their hot tempers and short fuses, wanted Jesus to call down fire from heaven like one of the prophets of old, and destroy the place. But as you would expect, Jesus rebuked the brothers, and the party went on to another village. You would remember how,

in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus drew on this traditional hatred between Jew and Samaritan to give point to His lesson given in answer to the question: "And who is my neighbour?"

So it was no wonder that the woman of Samaria, whose name is not recorded, was startled at being addressed by a Jew. Furthermore, it really was not done for a man to speak to a woman outside the home. To compound the matter, there is more than a hint in this story that this woman's morals were not all they should have been. Jesus was clearly ignoring social and religious and historic barriers.

The status of women was very low in Biblical times, as indeed it has been generally until this century. It was the teaching of Jesus, and still more His attitude to the women He met, that led the first Christians to give more respect to women, even though their status was still low by modern standards. It is surprising that Christian countries have been so slow to fully recognise the equality of women with men. It could well be that some of the apparent 'putting down' of women arose out of protectiveness: the big strong male protecting the delicate female from the stresses and pressures of the rugged world. And certainly, in many periods, brawn was far more necessary for survival than feminine attributes. The changing of social acceptance of anything is always a matter of either slow development or violent eruption. It seems that most women through the years have been happy enough with slow development, and only occasionally has violence erupted - for example the Women's Suffrage Movement early 'Last century, when votes for women was the main issue; and in more recent times, the Women's Liberation Movement.

As is usual in such upheavals, it is often just a small group which is prepared to go to the extremes required to draw attention to the situation, and force the whole community to think about the matter. The tragedy is that fanatics tend to take control and injure the very people they set out to liberate. The Women's Liberation Movement has succeeded in making jobs previously open only to men available also to women. There is more justice now in pay rates and promotion possibilities. But in achieving this, scorn has been thrown on those who prefer to be homemakers, seeing their vocation as wives and mothers. Many women have been made to feel guilty and lazy and non-productive, in what is really a tremendously important role.

Even the Church has been and still is slow to recognise the proper equality of men and women. In some Anglican Dioceses in Australia it is only fairly recently that women have had the right to be elected to Synod to represent their Parish. Our own Diocese of Willochra was a forerunner in this regard, women being eligible for election to Synod since the Diocese was formed in 1915. And of course some Dioceses still will not ordain women as priests.

People, and it would seem particularly Church-people, are generally quite conservative, and mistrust change. By and large this is a good thing, especially when change seems to be for the sake of change. But there are so many barriers between people, barriers which the Church must endeavour to break down, and certainly not be a party to. Barriers between people of different nationalities. Barriers of culture and colour and language. The Christian Church has not always followed the teaching of Christ in

trying to break down national and racial barriers, nor those between the sexes. We must admit it with shame, and do what we can in situations where we might have influence or can at least voice an opinion.

There are other barriers that we must try to break down in imitation of Jesus. Barriers of pride, of jealousy, of spite – things which separate us from the people amongst whom we live. We need to break down the barriers of indifference and slackness and meanness and laziness that make us so slow to serve the Church of God, and enable it to be the means of drawing men, women and children into the situation where they can more readily receive the living water of Christ: that living water which cleanses and preserves all who turn to Him.

AMEN