

*Next before Lent 2012*

What is the lectionary doing. Last week we had the opening verses of St John's gospel, the Christmas reading, and this week we have the transfiguration – the feast of the transfiguration is in August.

The Church of England gets a lot wrong, but actually this is no mistake.

We are about to enter the wilderness. Next Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent. Whether we attempt to live ascetic lives during Lent or not, the readings will challenge us in a way that focuses on the starkness of life, the pain, the struggle, the confusion. In our own lives, these periods don't neatly correspond to Lent, in fact they can happen at any time, and are even worse when they appear during the celebratory seasons - bereavement at Easter, divorce at Christmas, crushing depression at Pentecost. But here, on these two Sundays before Lent, we are given a guide, a way through the wilderness, both a hand to hold on to in the dark and a promise of the journey's end.

In the beginning was the Word - the Word incarnate, present in all creation, one with God, born among us and yet not limited to one point in history. Christ has gone before us, walked each path, seen the evolution of the insects and plants that inhabit our world. There is nowhere we can go that is unknown to him, no experience or feeling, pain or doubt, that he has not encountered. He has forged the path and if we look carefully we can see the tracks and follow them.

Christ immersed himself in human suffering and the complexities of human relationship as one that was fully human and yet totally divine. Emmanuel, God with us has not just gone before us, he is always present, alongside us, encouraging us when we flag, waiting patiently when we cry 'I can't go on', never pushing us beyond our endurance. He is with us even to the end of time. We may sit slumped and desolate for years, but he will still wait, and when we are ready to move, he will know a path that will get us to our destination in time. With Christ it is never too late. His is the hand held out to us, the hand that can pull us to our feet, and lead us safely on paths that we fear or are certain are too difficult for us.

Yet, even with that companion, why would we want to set out on a difficult journey? Why continue through the wilderness when it feels safer to turn back? There has to be a promise of something at the end. Even in our everyday walks, the promise of a pub lunch can spur us onwards, or if you are cold and wet, then home with a warm fire and a hot chocolate is what will keep us going. There has to be an end.

A couple of weeks ago I was on a retreat with the Team Clergy, working on how we can use the Team structure better to serve the parish. In a couple of hours of free time, three of us went for a walk. It was beautiful countryside, and the retreat house was up in the hills. We walked down, steeply down, very steeply down, for an hour towards the nearest village. After an hour of this we began to realise that when we went back, it would all be steeply uphill. That would take longer. Would we be late back? Was the village really worth that? Reluctantly we turned around and set off back up the hill. Encouraging each other, the quicker members walked at the slowest one's speed (well my speed actually) and we got back in good time, such good time that the fittest member, Clive, then went for a quick run (oh what it is to be fit). It was a shame not to have reached our expressed destination, but

we had been told that the village wasn't that pretty, and didn't have a great deal to offer. That wasn't a sufficient lure to make us speed up. None of us was that concerned about the promise offered by the village.

What promise are we being offered in this trek through the desert? We are shown it in today's reading. It is Christ in Glory, Christ ahead of us, as beacon, as light. Christ with the law and the prophets bathed in light. This is Christ outside of time, and yet in our world, present with Moses and Elijah, long dead in our time, but here present with Christ. This is a window to the end of the journey, a window to God's kingdom, to eternity. Here is the promise that heaven and earth are not separate, but that earth exists within heaven, it is held in being by God, without those hands cupping it so gently, it would have no existence. That we are shown this, that we are shown God's love through Christ, means this is no divine experiment with us as subjects, nor is it a project begun and then abandoned and left to its own devices, nor a play with predetermined roles and cast. No, we are shown a glimpse of God's power and love and the freedom that embodies them. Our world is constantly changing, we live in a universe of chance and possibility, and we have the intelligence to see some of the mathematics that explain what we can see, but beyond that, through that, permeating all, is the promise of God's love, a promise that says we too, small though we are in space and time, have our home in heaven, in Christ, and with Christ.

That great hymn, St Patrick's breastplate, says it all in the fourth verse, the one where the tune changes and catches everyone out :

Christ be with me, Christ within me, Christ behind me, Christ before me

Christ beside me, Christ to win me, Christ to comfort and restore me.

Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ in quiet, Christ in danger

Christ in hearts of all that love me

Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.

To that prayer, Christ says 'yes'.

*Mary Bide*