

Second Sunday in Lent

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Introduction

Sometimes, even when we are not in conflict with a person, the events of our lives — or the sequence of the events of our lives — can seem in conflict with each other. We go from high to low; from a mountain top to a valley; from transcendence to despondence. The gospel text for this Second Sunday of Lent is an extraordinary sequence. From the mountain top of transfiguration to the valley of desperation. Jesus is centre stage on top of the mountain, with his companions and also with Moses and Elijah; and in the valley, it could be argued that the father, the desperate father, is centre stage. These two experiences are in conflict with each other — the transfigurating revelation and the tortuous desperation. How do we live in between life sequences where birth and death, where promise and peril, where health and harm seem so close to each other?

Text

Luke 9: 28–43

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah”—not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. Just then a man from the crowd shouted, “Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not.” Jesus answered, “You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here.” While he was coming, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. And all were astounded at the greatness of God.

Comment

The story of the Transfiguration is an extraordinary one: Jesus is on a mountain top with some friends and then some forefathers appear with him, speaking about the future. The friends — Peter, James and John — go from being weighed down with exhaustion to elated with delusion and seem almost to become incoherent: “Let us make three dwellings!” A voice comes from the clouds and then they are all returned to solitude and silence. Then, the next day, down from the mountain they encounter a father begging for the welfare of his son. The disciples had not been able to help; and Jesus’ words are stern “You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you?”

Such a strange sequence of events.

All of this happens in Luke’s gospel. Luke’s gospel can be read in the following ‘sections’

- Section 1 — Stories of two women and their sons. Chapters 1–3
- Section 2 — Temptation in the desert. Chapter 4
- Section 3 — Galilee ministry. Chapters 4–9
- Section 4 — Jesus turns towards Jerusalem. Chapter 9–19
- Section 5 — Jesus arrives in Jerusalem & crucifixion. Chapter 19–23
- Section 6 — Resurrection. Chapter 24

These twin stories of Transfiguration and Trauma arrive towards the end of the Galilee ministry. Jesus is about to turn his face towards Jerusalem. That section — the journey towards impending crucifixion — is long, almost ten chapters, and Jesus’ mood becomes heavy during it; his parables become weighted down. There is always some hope, and in the midst of the hope, there is always sombre reality of empire, crucifixion and conflict.

The gospel writer is almost prefiguring the elation and confusion of the journey towards Jerusalem in these twin sequences of Transfiguration. Jesus’ own mood is understandable. Jerusalem is an emotional and physical conflict point in the narrative: in Luke’s account of the gospel, Jesus is only depicted as travelling to Jerusalem once as an adult, and as we noted last week, it’s notable that the arrival at the Temple of Jerusalem is Luke’s story’s culminating temptation in the desert. So Jesus seems to know — and perhaps not because of divine intervention, but because of political nous — that his arrival in Jerusalem will increase conflict. Stories of beatitude and bruising begin to accompany each other from now on in this gospel, where followers are asked to view brutal political and religious realities through new eyes of faith.

And this seems to be a message for Luke: difficult and demanding things will happen; follow anyway. Faith, in the economy of Luke, is to be applied in the circumstances that are most trying. Jesus came to seek and save the lost, he says, after he causes controversy by befriending Zacchaeus (Luke 19). This is not going to be pretty, but rather will be precarious. This week’s text reminds us that the mountain top of some private visions of faith will always need to be in conversation with experiences where faith seems less comforting, less balmy, less bright.

Response

It may be a good idea to hold together stories of blessing and burden alongside each other; recognising that stories of consolation come along with stories of concern. This is not evidence of failure, but is evidence of reality.

Prayer

Bright and Burdened Jesus,
You went from a mountain of consolation
to a valley of dismay.
And your mood shifted, as the light sometimes
comes in and out of the clouds.
Us too: we hold wonder on the one hand
and worry in the other.
Be with us, as we stand between
things that drag us one way and the other.
Help us keep our eyes on hope
and work hard for the goodness of all.
Because this is what you did,
and so we follow.

Amen.

Season: Lent

Themes: Inner Journey