

3 March 2019— 2 Cor 3:12-4:2; Luke 9 28-36

Make a space in your soul for God

Last week my ten-year-old twins and their cousin, decided that they were going to stop talking. They didn't tell us what they were doing, but, one lunchtime, with much pointing and a certain amount of giggling, they proceeded to pass around food whilst my mother-in-law and I discussed how long this peace and quiet might last. Of course, it did not last long, and normal conversation was soon resumed. I told them that not so long ago, I had spent a day in silence on retreat. They were intrigued. A group of adults had chosen to stay silent all day. "Why would you do that?"

If you have had a similar experience, and some of you may have had much more experience than I, you might agree that this is quite a hard question to answer. How could I put into words understandable to a ten-year-old, the sense of peace, and purpose of that shared experience? I settled on this. "Well, so we could talk to God." For my children that was clearly not the correct answer. "You stayed silent so that you could *talk* to God?" Of course, they were right. A better answer would have been, "to listen to God."

In the silence, we were able to make space for the Holy Spirit to prompt us, not on our terms, squeezed amongst the tasks of everyday life, hidden within our agendas and to do lists, but on his terms, drifting in and out of our thoughts, guiding our reading and contemplation. The beauty of the experience could not be captured by words, but it was nourishment to each of us, individually and collectively.

Listening is an important part of our reading today. The Transfiguration was a powerful and awesome event. One commentary described it as a glimpse behind the scenes at the workings of God.

The event came about because Jesus, Peter, James and John made space to listen to God. I don't believe Jesus anticipated what would happen as he set off up the mountain. But it was his habit to take himself away from time to time to pray and seek God's guidance.

We can't know what Jesus prayed about, but we know he was aware of the suffering that was to come and he was having difficulty communicating this to his disciples. On the mountain top that day, Jesus received an endorsement of his mission from God.

Firstly, the presence of Moses and Elijah shows that this story is rooted in God's story, in the Old Testament. Both talked with Jesus about what was to come, perhaps placing the story of this one man into the bigger picture of God's plan for his people.

The voice from the cloud reminds us of Jesus baptism in the river Jordan. An occasion when Jesus showed his humanity. Jesus is without sin, but still sought repentance and baptism, just like everyone else.

The shining radiance of the three figures reveals to the disciples, that Jesus is not merely human, he is also divine. It is reminiscent of Moses' encounter with God at the top of Mount Sinai, which is referred to in the passage from Corinthians which we have just heard.

Then there are the words spoken by God himself. God confirms Peter's understanding that Jesus is the Chosen One and instructs the disciples that they must **listen** to him.

Jesus responds to this endorsement. Later in the chapter, he starts to prepare his disciples for what is to come when he again tries to explain his forthcoming death. Shortly after, (v 51) Jesus ministry in the rural areas draws to a close. We are told that he "Set his face to go to Jerusalem." In the next chapter he sends seventy followers out in pairs to go ahead of him with very specific instructions about how to share his message. Perhaps he is anticipating a time when he can no longer be physically present amongst them.

Peter's response to the Transfiguration seems less focussed. Unlike Jesus, who seems mobilised to action, Peter wants to prolong and hold onto the experience. An understandable reaction, similar to that of others elsewhere in the Gospels.

At the beginning of his ministry (chapter 4) when Jesus returned to his home town of Nazareth, the local people tried to get him to stay. When he refused, they became angry and drove him from the town. In John's gospel, Mary

Magdalene met the risen Christ near the empty tomb. Jesus said to her “do not hold on to me.....” He gave her a message to take to his followers.

Like the disciples, and others, we can be tempted to try to contain Christ, limiting our faith to certain activities in church or certain types of behaviour. But, also like the disciples, we have a job to do living out the love of Christ and sharing the gospel. We need to make space to listen to God, but we mustn't stop there. Listening is more than just hearing. It requires a response.

Because Jesus obeyed God, we are people of the new covenant. We are free to let the spirit work in us and through us, transforming us into the likeness of Christ. As you know, the vision of this church is just that, to see lives transformed by following Christ in love and service.

Paul explores this freedom, this access to God for everyone, in his epistle to the Corinthians. Those who do not receive Christ are unable to fully understand the will of God. Their understanding is obscured, as if by a veil. Their minds are hardened, and they cannot be transformed.

As we approach lent, we remember Jesus in the wilderness taking time to pray, listen and work out what God wanted him to do. Lent has been described as, “a time to make space in your soul for God.” Of course, we can do this at any time, but it is helpful to have a specific focus on the Holy Spirit's transforming work in us. We might do this through giving something up, or through taking something on. We might do it alone or in a group, in an organised or structured way or simply by taking time out when we feel prompted to do so.

It need not be onerous or oppressive, God meets us where we are. He knows the other things going on in our lives. The pressures, the problems, the doubts and weaknesses, but as long as we are willing to try, this will not prevent him from meeting with us. When they went up the mountain, Peter, John and James are described as being “weighed down with sleep.” They were not praying with Jesus, in fact they could barely stay awake, yet God spoke to them too, “This is my Son, my chosen, **listen** to him!”

Listening involves a response. Despite Peter's suggestion, they could not stay on top of the mountain, there was work to be done. When they came down a crowd was already waiting and, as I have suggested, Jesus was planning for a time when he would no longer be with them.

As you journey through lent, how will you listen? How will you make space in your soul for God? Will you give access, not only to the places where you feel comfortable, but to more challenging areas of your life? Will you make sure that what you have heard is acted upon?

Shortly after this encounter, Jesus reminds the disciples of the importance of children. I believe that you can learn a lot from children, as I did when mine reminded me that the main purpose of prayer was to listen.

I may have told you before of the time I was asked to draw a picture depicting my relationship with God. I intended to draw a father leading a small child by the hand. I saw God guiding me gently through the ups and downs of life. My artistic ability is not great and when I looked at the finished drawing what I saw was a frustrated toddler being pulled along by a patient father.

I will leave you to decide whether this was purely my lack of talent or prompting from the Holy Spirit to let me know that my plans and his were not in line. Either way it's an image that has stayed with me and one which comes to mind during the opening prayer we have been using in Teddy Praise this term.

The prayer concludes with these words,

*“Let me know what you have planned,
Lead the way, God. Hold my hand”*

As you make space in your soul for God this lent, allow the Holy Spirit to lead the way. Your journey may be one of obedience like that of Jesus as he “set his face to go to Jerusalem.” But perhaps you are weary, like the disciples, eyes heavy with sleep as they waited for Jesus to finish his prayers. Or maybe you are reluctant like me, needing a clear message to get back on the right track. However, and wherever you meet with God, listen as his will and purpose for you is revealed. Then consider prayerfully, your response.

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