

2nd Sunday Lent (A)

12th March 2023

'Climb the mountain — Experience the view'

Gen 12: the call of Abraham 2Tim1: *He abolished death ... proclaimed life*
... Mt 17: 1–9: the Transfiguration.

I don't know how many of you have learnt to drive. My parents insisted that we learn to drive at the earliest opportunity, and so our 17th-birthday present was driving lessons until we passed. In the city of St Albans, where I did my driving practice, there's a steep hill, *Holy-well* Hill, whose name refers to a tradition surrounding the 3rd-century martyrdom of the Roman soldier-turned-Christian, St Alban. Time and again, in readiness for my driving test, we went up Holywell Hill, practising those 'hill starts' on what was really quite a daunting route.

But none of that, 40 yrs ago, prepared me for the steepest hill I have ever tackled in a car, which is Mt Tabor. 4½ yrs ago, on my most recent pilgrimage to the Holy Land, a friend & I were driving round Israel, and after our stay in Nazareth, we crossed the valley to the small town of Daburiyah, named after the prophetess Deborah whose ministry there, recorded in the book of Judges, dates back to the 11th or 12th c. BC. Daburiyah lies

at the foot of Mt Tabor, which rises up dramatically from there, an imposing rounded mount, visible for miles around. From within the town's little residential streets, then, it's the most daunting hill climb up Mt Tabor — I honestly had moments when even in 1st gear I wasn't sure that our car would make it. Thankfully my friend was super-calm, and reassured me that it was all OK; just take it slowly and gently!

In a car, it's still a very windy road up higher up, as one approaches the peak. (Pilgrim coaches, on the other hand, are forbidden even to go there, and one has to disembark and transfer on to minibuses for the final few minutes ascent on a road with multiple hairpin bends, taken at some speed by the regular drivers!) My ascent was more cautious, and it was quite a relief to get the car park at the top. The summit of Mt Tabor at almost 2000ft is an impressive spot, commanding a magnificent panoramic view of the surrounding Jezreel valley in Galilee, a scene that is one of the loveliest in the Holy Land. It's the traditional site of the *Transfiguration* of Jesus, and at the

peak one is greeted by the sight of the beautiful 20th-c. church ‘of the Transfiguration’ built on ancient foundations. One previous time when I was there we had a beautiful and peaceful afternoon Mass in that church, the sunshine streaming into the stone church. A spot truly to lift one’s heart and mind to God.

But even so, what a steep and daunting hill Mt Tabor is! Why on earth did Jesus climb it on *foot* with 3 of His apostles; and what’s it got to do with Lent? I think that the answer to that 2nd question comes through the answer to the 1st, so let’s first think about what exactly Jesus was wanting for SS Peter, James & John on their mountain walk. And then we’ll apply that to *our* journey of Lent.

My university chaplain used to say — I remember it well — why does the Transfiguration crop up *so many times* in the year? (I think he was running out of things to say about it!) He’s probably right: we hear of it on the *feast* of the Transfiguration in August; we get it on a *weekday* as we read systematically through the Gospels (wk 6); and then we get it again every year on this 2nd

Sunday of Lent. Why so important? Well, if you think about it, short of the raising of Lazarus, and the Resurrection itself, surely this event must rank pretty high up the list of astonishing miracles? What Our Lord took His three closest apostles up Mt Tabor for — away from the others and far away from the crowds — was to let them see something that no-one else had ever yet seen: a glimpse of His divine glory, just a hint of His true nature as the Son of God. He let them experience His divine glory to reassure them. The Transfiguration, you might say, is the ‘light at the beginning of the tunnel’ to assure them that there really will be ‘light at the end of the tunnel’ too: that is, the light of the Resurrection at Easter. They will have to face the trepidation, the doubts, and the isolation of Jesus’s Passion, though they don’t know it yet. The apostles will have to go with Him up to Jerusalem, to see Him opposed, arrested, tortured and crucified. Jesus knew that before all of that they would need this strengthening glimpse, here alone, quietly, on the mountain in Galilee, to get them through the dark and frightening times before Easter.

That climb up Mt Tabor was an effort, but it was also peaceful; it demanded perseverance, but it was in the safe company of Jesus. It was a crucial link, first for this inner circle, in the way Jesus revealed Himself gradually to the world. They never forgot it, and I am always struck by the way St Peter refers to this event years later when (in 2 Pet 1) he says:

[16] For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty.

[17] For when He received honour and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to Him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," [18] we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with Him on the holy mountain. (ESV)

So, what's the point for us? Why this account of the Transfiguration in early Lent? Well, we too need a glimpse of Jesus's divinity as we take the road to Easter; as we make the proper effort of the journey through Lent. Without the effort there is no reward; without the climb there is no revelation and light. We need to know that our efforts at a decent Lenten discipline in are worth it, have a

spiritual purpose. We need to make these efforts in Lent, in the company of Jesus — climbing this steep hill, if you will — to have any hope of understanding the meaning of His suffering, and the dignity bestowed on us by the radiant light of His triumph. In other words, this 2nd Sunday of Lent becomes a foretaste / incentive / mini-Easter / pre-Easter; a bright shaft of pre-Resurrection light.

We must allow the Transfiguration radiance from the face of Jesus to shed light on our hearts this Lent. This bright piercing light must shine right into every nook and cranny of our souls, so that there remain no dark parts, hidden corners of sin, in our lives, come Easter: so that when we stand in the Easter light, light of the Resurrection, light of the Paschal Candle, we'll be perfectly clean in heart, not still trying to hide parts of our lives from the Risen One. Maybe, like the apostles, we're a bit afraid of the brightness of Jesus's divine light, but we needn't be: we shouldn't in any way be afraid to let Him light up our lives, chase away the shadows of sin. He is love and mercy; and He so desires us to be totally freed from sin.

So, this Lent — beginning now, in early Lent — we must make efforts to conduct a deep examination of our lives, in the light of Christ. We began together, last Sunday, as we thought about those practices in Lent (fast, pr. & alms) that we are taking on in order to help attune our lives more to the will of God, leading us ultimately to seek reconciliation with Him in the great Sacrament of Confession. Over the coming Sundays we'll have a chance to pursue a longer examination of conscience together. We shall hear of three encounters which Jesus has, recorded in the Gospel of St John: three long passages, traditional Gospel texts for the Sundays of Lent: John chapters 4, 9 & 11 — the Samaritan woman at the well; the man born blind; and the raising of Lazarus. These will urge us from *sin to faith*; from *blindness to sight*; from *death to life*. We shall see that only Jesus gives us that freedom to live life to the full and not be burdened by our human failures.

But for today we can make a preliminary observation: and that is the *necessity* we have to obey the commandments of God at all. If we do not have the

conviction that God — made known to us in Christ Jesus — is our true guide, then we will never have any reason to make our Confession when we go wrong. If we think that *we* can decide what is right and wrong, then we will undoubtedly end up distancing ourselves from God. It might “feel right to me” ... But we may be wrong! We need a true guide, and Jesus is that sure guide. We owe Him perfect obedience. When God asked Abraham to leave his country, he obeyed — and this was counted as blessing Him. Our obedience, too, will bring blessings. God speaks from the cloud on the occasion of the Transfiguration: “*This is My Son, the Beloved. Listen to Him!*” Again: obedience is called for. And Jesus says, further, “*Do not be afraid!*” So, let's not be afraid of total obedience, of total adherence to Jesus and to His Church, in everything: let's allow Him to light up our souls, speak to our hearts. Let's follow Him; happily climb that hill with Him this Lent (make the effort!); trust Him absolutely that He'll take us somewhere we need to go; and despite our possible fears, that He will tenderly forgive us our sins.