

Holy Trinity & St Peter South Wimbledon Sermons

Baptism on Valentine's day (Luke 9: 28 – 36)

By Chris Skilton

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There were at least three Valentines in the early church. They all lived in the second or third century in Rome and North Africa, and all of them were put to death for refusing to deny their Christian faith. Clearly Valentine was a popular name of the time – but we know next to nothing about any of these three.

Their courageous act of witness was marked in mid-February, at the time that the Christian church, as it so often did, appropriated Roman pagan festivals and made them a feast day in the life of the church (much as happened with Christmas). “*Lupercalia*” was a Roman fertility rite and was made a day to remember those whose ‘names are justly revered among men but whose acts are known only to God’. In medieval Europe there also grew (with great popularity) a myth that around February 14th, at the time of *Lupercalia*, song-birds paired off and mated. Hence the way in which we have arrived where we are, a long way from the original Valentine(s)!

The Sunday before Lent also brings us year by year the account of the Transfiguration. I understand that the view from that mountain across Galilee is quite stunning – but of course the disciples were not looking! They are caught up in an extraordinary event where God in Christ is encountered in mystery, awe and intimacy. The encounter doesn't elicit thoughts about God but is an encounter with God himself.

Jesus shines brightly before them – is this shining a sign of his divinity or a proclamation that his humanity is a glorious thing. Jesus' humanity here transfigured is a foretaste of the glory that all his people will one day share. And if you want to see Jesus' divinity, look at his death.

I am sure that the contrasts between this account and that of his passion and death are offered to us to make those connections. This mountain-top and the hill-top on which he was crucified need to be understood side by side. Here he is revealed in glory; there he is revealed in apparent shame. At his transfiguration his clothes are dazzling white; at his crucifixion they are stripped from him and gambled over. Here he is flanked by Moses and Elijah, two great heroes of Jewish faith; there two thieves are crucified either side of him to represent the level to which Israel has sunk in its rebellion against God. On this mountain, Elijah is present; there Elijah fails to appear. Now a bright cloud overshadows the mountain; there darkness will cover the land. On this occasion Peter blurts out how wonderful it is to be with Jesus; at his passion and death Peter will hide in shame and deny the Christ. At the Transfiguration a voice from heaven declares “my Son, my chosen”; at his death a Roman centurion will give voice to whether this could be “a Son of God”.

The mountain-top and the hill-top belong together as we begin to see glory in the Cross and the cross in the glory. Jesus himself may or may not speak of this himself. He speaks of his forthcoming “departure” in Jerusalem. Those who have been to a Greek airport will know that the same word is used to day – “exodus”. Did Jesus speak then of a new liberation for the people of God from the depths to which they had fallen, with the promise of new life and new hope?

The first disciples needed to revise their understanding and to see that ‘Christ crucified’ was not an intolerable contradiction but rather the glorious highpoint of God's promise to Israel and through Israel to the nations of the world. The disciple who understands this and writes about it most compellingly is John the Evangelist. Time and again in his gospel he speaks about Jesus being “lifted up” and “glorified” and

we soon discover that when John writes this, he is thinking supremely of the crucifixion of Jesus.

The baptism service expresses this well, and we shall hear these words as Christopher is baptised later this morning: “Receive the sign of the cross. Do not be ashamed to confess the faith of Christ crucified. Fight valiantly as a disciple of Christ against sin, the world and the devil, and remain faithful to Christ to the end of your life”. In baptism we supremely identify with the crucified and therefore glorified Christ and express our commitment to him – whatever the cost. Baptism is therefore always a dangerous enterprise, because we never quite know what it might entail. But the service continues with a prayer that God will: “restore in you the image of his glory and lead you in the light and obedience of Christ”.

We too are called to lives of glory – the glory that was in Jesus on the mountain-top and on the hill-top where he met his death. Glorious lives, lives lived in Christ and under his banner and with him, give glimpses of this glory. That brings us back to our Valentine: three men whose lives were not in vain. Three men who lived out the baptismal calling to confess the faith of Christ crucified whatever the consequences, and who thereby showed something of the light and obedience and glory of Christ. Three men whose names live on and whose true calling could be a challenge to us to lead glorious lives – far more than by the way in which their name is perpetuated year by year today.