

The Old Royal Naval College Chapel, Greenwich, London SE10 9NN

Choral Eucharist on the Sunday next before Lent

The Revd George Bush, Rector

Sunday 23 February 2020 at 11:00am

Transfiguration

Across Europe and much of the world just before Lent there will have been the feverish grip of festival as people keep carnival. 'Carnival', I suppose literally translated as 'a farewell to meat', denotes the days of celebration preceding what is meant to be a serious and self-denying season of Lent. In Rio, San Francisco and Venice, Carnival is reveling in all that is good about the body; dance, song and from the photos, undoubtedly sexuality. But across Europe too, little villages will have held their own communal celebrations with children in costume to the fore. In England, more sedately we eat pancakes, to remind ourselves of the eggs and milk which were to be denied us in Lent; in my house reduced to scoffing all the bacon and chocolate in the corners of the 'fridge.

This concentration on the appetite and upon its temptations – as if for a final fling – is a reminder to us that, though we are all body we are also spirit and that we need Lent to remind us that the spirit needs some attention also. We know profoundly that our bodies are subject to change – the tailor who makes my cassocks wisely assumes that she had better add on a couple of inches every few years. In fact given the processes of life we are actually quite atomically different over a span of years – there is likely to be no part of me standing before you today which – I gather - existed twenty years ago. For Christians, change is a spiritual dynamic. When I am discussing wedding services with couples I naturally direct them to the three services which lawfully may be used. The first, in the 1662 Prayer Book of course draws from earlier sources even before the significant work of Dr Cranmer at the time of the Reformation. But as Professor MacCulloch notes the Prayer Book wedding service is the first Christian rite to give a positive spin to Christian marriage! Before that it was conceived as a concession to human weakness, a safe place in which to confine lust.

A more sensitive approach to marriage has tended to suggest that it can and should be a means of God's Grace –not just the bride's big day, but such a giving of one's heart into the care of another, such a preferring of the other before oneself, that it has a transformative effect upon one's life and should, as the marriage unfolds over time, make one more forbearing, more patient, more loving – in short, more like Jesus. Change of course is a constant; our leaders and their bureaucratic followers tell us that we must plan for continuous improvement; rather difficult when you get a 100% approval rating and have to plan for some mistake! I was trying last weekend to explain to the teenage daughters of friends just how difficult it was to plan a night out with a group of friends when I was their age. Telephone calls were expensive and one's parents policed

the 'phone; if one of you was late you simple waited, or hoped you might find a 'phone box nearby; and if anything went wrong then your parents just worried. In thirty years the world is an utterly changed place in the most ordinary ways.

Yet this concept of change is a critical component of the dynamic of Christian living. Recently a vast and hugely creative font has been introduced into the nave of Salisbury Cathedral. It has been designed and made not by some curious ecclesiastical tat emporium but by a garden sculptor. And by what I gather is a considerable feat of engineering, the font is so balanced that it both flows continuously from four spouts at each corner and also has an utterly still flat surface so that the worshippers may both bless themselves with free-flowing water and see their reflection perfectly and clearly. So flat and clear that a tourist trustingly rested her handbag on it – with predictable results. I find this a helpful device by which to understand the transforming power of God's grace – we may bless ourselves in water that flows beyond our controlling and splashes around us, and we may see ourselves reflected back – not so that one may lament the depredations of the years or complement oneself on one's beauty, but simply to remind ourselves that we are still not yet like Jesus. If it is true that there is nothing physically existing of me that was around twenty years ago that is indeed salutary. ! Yet the continuity of me as a person is, I sense, more spiritual than physical; the great mediaeval mystic Meister Eckhart made the point that the body lives in the soul and not the other way 'round.

The Transfiguration of Jesus witnessed by his disciples is the revelation of Him as he actually is – not just the human son of particular parents, but the anointed one of God. Some regard this as a resurrection story which has got out of place in the Gospel. That is as may be; what counts is that his divine glory was apparent in his human body as indeed it was on Easter Day. In Jesus the glory of God has become a human body which passes away, but which is endlessly renewed in spirit by a pattern of connection with God and others. The Transfiguration is not the changing of Jesus; it is the vision of our vocation – to be caught up into how he is.

In my fiftieth year by some strange process of customer research I started receive, unsolicited and free, copies of the Spectator magazine. In a sort of way I enjoyed them, but on being asked to enter into a subscription, I could but respond that although assuredly I was more right wing in politics than when I was in my 20s, I was not yet that right wing! (No offence to Spectator readers intended). But if I have not changed for the worse, perhaps I have yet to change for the better, although we are reassured that it is 'from one degree of glory to another' that we are being changed. Mercifully we are not on our own, for in the Church where we practice the discipline of acceptance, we acknowledge that we are transfigured with Christ and together, that with Iraneaus we may say and perhaps above all on this day, that 'the glory of God is the living man'.

