

*May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.*

Well, here we are again – the Lord's people, on the Lord's day, meeting around the Lord's altar; but, once again at a distance. I can't speak for everyone, but there's a familiarity with this format of worship with which I'm not entirely comfortable. Since arriving in Colac, this is the 27th Sunday on which I have led public worship via livestream, versus 22 Sundays where a congregation has been present. In Victoria, lockdown has been akin to a Hotel California for the COVID-19 pandemic – you can occasionally check-out, but it seems that you can never leave. It is within the gloomy atmosphere of lockdown that we will begin our Lenten journey for 2021 this coming Wednesday, which I'm sure will do much to ensure a suitably penitential mood is kept among the church and unchurched alike. I suspect that pancakes and ash crosses on foreheads may well be the thing furthest from peoples' minds at this time. I suspect that many are likely too distracted by anxiety to worry too much about the ecclesiastical calendar. This is fair enough; while the present lockdown is only supposed to be for 5 days, the lockdown initiated in July and scaled up in August 2020 was meant to be for 6 weeks, and it ended up lasting 111 days.

There's no way of getting around it – lockdown is awful, loathsome, dreadful, miserable, and every other synonym that Google might possibly be able to produce. I am acutely aware that sweet words and patronizing sentimentality isn't going to make anyone feel any better today – the fact that God has a plan doesn't make the present reality any less disagreeable, and probably doesn't help all that much in terms of dispelling the anxiety and fear induced by that same reality. Nevertheless, this lockdown is different in one very significant way. There is a light at the end of the tunnel this time around. In the dark days of August and September 2020, a vaccine was still very much a potentiality. This time around a vaccine is an actuality. The vaccines exist; there are 10 vaccines with efficacies of between 67-95% (which is better than our seasonal flu shot) which are being administered around the world right now. When I checked last night, more than 78 million people worldwide had already been vaccinated. Admittedly, this represents less than 1 per cent of the world's population, but the point is that vaccination is well underway in many countries throughout the world, and is due to commence in Australia any day now. This is, I would suggest, cause for quiet confidence that the worst of last year shouldn't be repeated.

In a way, today's Gospel is oddly appropriate for the place where we find ourselves today. Jesus takes Peter, James, and John and goes up a mountain, and there he is transfigured. Saint Mark describes how Jesus' 'clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them', and how the divine voice from the cloud pronounces Jesus to be the Beloved Son in whom God is well pleased.

The transfiguration was for Peter, James, and John a foretaste of the resurrection, though they did not know it at that time, despite the fact that Jesus charges them to ‘tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead’. The scene is teeming with Old Testament allusions – allusions which, in one way or another, are intricately connected with the Theophany on Mount Sinai after the Exodus. The very high mountain in the scene narrated by Saint Mark is reminiscent of Mount Sinai; as in Exodus God the Father is manifest in a cloud, the presence of Moses and Elijah (each of whom encountered God themselves upon the Mount of Revelation) stand for the Law and the Prophets, respectively, whose words find their fulfillment in Jesus. Most importantly, however, in the same way that God spoke face to face with Moses, and Moses saw God’s glory, so God’s glory is manifested upon the mountain in and through his beloved Son with whom he is well pleased.

Of all the Evangelists, it is Saint Luke who probably best captures what it is the apostles have actually seen: in his words, they “saw his glory”. In other words, the apostles have seen that which belongs to Jesus from eternity – a glimpse of divine, majestic splendour. How amazing it must have been for the apostles, who had known their Rabbi and Master as a lowly Galilean peasant, to see him as he really was and is. How amazing it must have been to glimpse the form which belonged to eternity, the form of God, and not merely the temporal form which Jesus took upon himself when he emptied himself and assumed the form of a slave. How amazing it must have been to look God in the face, and not merely at God’s back – the privilege granted to Moses in the 33rd chapter of Exodus.

How fitting it is that this season after Epiphany comes to a close with virtually the same words which with they opened – with God the Father telling us that this Jesus is his Beloved Son, and that we should listen to him. There are many instances in the Gospels, and in Scripture in general, where the real meaning of something is veiled or obscured by allusions or references, or by other literary devices employed by the writer – like when something works as a pun or a quasi-homophone in Hebrew or Greek, but the allusion doesn’t survive translation into English. This is not one of these instances. This, I think, is one of those times when God the Father speaks to us through scripture saying what He means and meaning what He says – Listen to Jesus; take note of what he says; do your best to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest it, to understand it and act according to it.

As I have said on a few occasions during the course of the past six or so weeks, Lent, Holy Week, and Easter only really make sense when we are able to comprehend who it is that goes to the cross in order to make by his one oblation of himself once offered a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world. The Transfiguration, like a COVID-19 vaccine, represents that glimmer of hope that even when all appears to be lost, when all seems to be darkness and despair, doom and gloom, that not all is lost and that God has a plan after all.

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*