

Last before Lent 2021

I wonder how many times in the past year you have heard politicians or journalists use the word: ‘unprecedented’. I’m getting rather tired of it myself. It’s often used as an excuse – ‘You can’t blame us for making mistakes; this is an unprecedented situation - there’s been nothing like this ever before.’

But, as the writer of Ecclesiastes observes, there is nothing new under the sun; there has usually been something at least a *bit* like it before. There have been pandemics in the past, such as the Spanish flu of the early 20th century or the black death of the 14th century. Historical documents record the impact of plague here in the 16th century: in 1593 Witney innkeepers were forbidden to take visitors from other infected towns, and many of you will know that some of the houses on the east side of Church Green were built as plague retreats for the staff of Corpus Christi College in Oxford. Self-isolation and social distancing are nothing new.

Added to this, the fight against this invisible but ingenious viral enemy sometimes seems a bit like a military battle in which we all need to pull together and make sacrifices in the interests of the common good. That’s one reason that the heroically courageous actions of WWII veteran, Captain Sir Tom Moore, captured the imagination so powerfully and inspired so many with hope. We know the story of WWII and we know *that war ended well for us*.

But we can’t push these resemblances too far. One of the big mistakes the UK made in the early days of the pandemic was to treat it like a flu epidemic, and the Corona Virus isn’t a malign intelligence like Adolf Hitler and his henchmen, but a natural phenomenon simply being itself; we can’t destroy it, we’re going to have to find a way to live alongside it.

Our current situation then is both like and unlike previous more familiar challenges that we’ve faced. It carries echoes of the past but it is also new.

One of the principles of adult psychology that seems to hold across all cultures is our habit of making sense of life in terms of what we already know. This is very helpful to us. Every day doesn’t have to start from scratch.

It's not like that when we're children; then everything is new, genuinely unprecedented, and we don't have much of a past to bring to bear on it. The philosopher and psychologist William James famously described the first weeks of life this way:

The baby, assailed by eyes, ears, nose, skin, and entrails at once, feels it all as one great blooming, buzzing confusion

The child's task is gradually to impose some kind of order on this; it takes time and huge amounts of mental and physical energy.

As the small child encounters so many things in the world for the first time he or she can be overwhelmed with wonder, something beautifully described in these words by the seventeenth century divine Thomas Traherne:

Great Wonders clothd with Glory did appear,
Amazement was my Bliss.
That and my Wealth was evry where;
No Joy to this!

But that joy and wonder can quickly turn to trauma. When he was a toddler one of my grandsons was enraptured by the trees in his local park; then autumn came. Every time a leaf fluttered to the ground he ran to it crying 'Oh no!' It made for very slow and anguished walks.

As adults we, perhaps thankfully, put all this behind us. We know our world and its ways; and we make sense of the new in the light of that knowledge. This is what people did with Jesus. In Mark Chapter 8, the passage that directly precedes today's gospel reading, Jesus asks his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?', and they respond with a list of figures they already know John the Baptist revived, Elijah returned as had been promised in the book of Malachi, or the prophet like Moses who had been promised in the book of Deuteronomy.

Now just as the COVID pandemic is rather like previous pandemics Jesus was rather like each of those figures, and the gospel-writers exploit this resemblance in all sorts of ways (for example Matthew's baby Jesus has lots of echoes of baby Moses, and Luke draws out resonances with Elijah in Jesus' adult ministry and of course in his ascension into heaven.)

But though Jesus is *like* Moses and Elijah, he *isn't* Moses or Elijah, and when he goes on to ask, 'But who do *you* say that I am?' Peter comes much closer to the truth when he answers, 'You are the messiah!'

Yet, just like my grandson's concept of a leaf, Peter's concept of 'the messiah' is limited; and when Jesus explains that the messiah is not a warrior-prince but a victim who will suffer and die, he too cries out 'Oh no!'

Six days later, with all this stuff buzzing around in their heads, Peter, James, and John are led away by Jesus from their usual familiar environment of settled ideas high up into the mountains, and they have an experience that is totally overwhelming – incandescent, blooming, buzzing, confusion. When they try to describe it later they again start with what they know – first century detergent – but washing brighter. Much brighter because this is the dazzling, blinding light of divine immanence, the *shekinah* that Moses encountered on Sinai and Paul on the road to Damascus.

As the disciples try to impose form on that which is beyond them, the figures who have been on their minds and in their conversation take shape – *with* Jesus but distinct *from* Jesus. As ever, Peter has a true instinct; he senses that despite its terrifying nature this experience signifies something good. But then somehow his vision contracts, we're told from terror, and he tries to stay in control by pigeon-holing Jesus, placing him alongside the other two in a series of dwellings labelled: 'Giver of the law', 'greatest of the prophets', and 'best rabbi ever'.

It's at this point, just as he is valiantly struggling to stop his head exploding, that the cloud comes down. The cloud which is deeply disorientating but within which he can mercifully hide himself from that blinding light and lay down his burden of over-thinking.

There's a famous anonymous mediaeval work of Christian spirituality called 'The Cloude of Unknowing'. It was of course written in Britain, the land of the rain cloud. The argument of this book is simple. It's not until we are lost in the cloud, when we've got to a point beyond all thoughts, images, and ideas, that we have any chance of apprehending the truth that would otherwise be beyond us. And we don't find this truth – it finds us. It pierces through the cloud to touch us, quite unexpectedly, with love.

The voice the disciples hear in the cloud tells them that their old ideas won't do. Jesus is not Moses or Elijah, not just rabbi, or even messiah; Jesus is divine son – and crucially – Jesus is the Beloved.

And then, back to normal. But – to borrow another over-used phrase from the last year - it's a new normal. For Jesus is seen with new eyes. Peter, James, and John have caught a glimpse of his divine identity but alongside it something equally important, conveyed best by the original word order in Greek:

They saw Jesus only, with them.

We are in our own pandemic cloud at the moment. It seems to go on and on, with one step forward and two steps back, hope, grief, disappointment, fear, conflicting narratives and a rocky road map to guide us into an unknown future. So it's good to recall that insight from the Cloude of unknowing that it is often when we are at our most lost and near the end of our resources that we stumble on unexpected truths, are touched by unexpected love, and find Jesus only with us.

Last week Esther preached about the light that shines in the darkness spoken of in the prologue to John's Gospel, a passage that tends to evoke images of Christmas candles flickering bravely in midwinter. Today's Gospel, so full of dazzling glory may at first sight seem a long way from that, but look again at last week's reading and you will see that they both speak of the same light:

The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through
Jesus Christ.

we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son

And the Word became flesh and lived among us,

Then they saw Jesus only, with them

Amen.