

Sunday Next before Lent 2017 evening

2 Kings 2: 1 – 12; Matthew 17: 9 – 23

OK, pub quiz question, starter for ten: which football commentator first coined the now time-worn cliché that football is a game of two halves? Well, the nearest you'll get to a definitive answer – or at least, the nearest I got to a definitive answer after devoting a quite disproportionate amount of internet research to finding one – is that it was Andy Gray, the Scottish born footballer turned pundit. But that, like all things in life, is open to dispute.

What I suspect Andy Gray did not know – but perhaps he did: who am I to judge? - is that the cliché is as true of scripture and of a life committed to following Jesus as it is of the beautiful game of football. Because today we've been dealing with the story of the transfiguration of Jesus; and believe me, it's a story of two halves if ever there were one.

This morning we had the first half: Jesus went up the mountain, was transfigured and Peter, James and John saw him dazzling white with Moses and Elijah standing next to him. Taken in isolation it gives us the nod and the wink that this person Jesus, about whom we are reading, was actually none other than God's-self; and it fortifies us and sustains us to go through the agony of Lent – which, remember, begins on Wednesday – with the knowledge that, actually, it's going to be all right in the end.

But it's a story of two halves: and tonight we've had the second half. Tonight he comes down the mountain, tells the disciples to keep mum about what they've seen, is wittered at by a man to heal his son, and predicts that he's going to be betrayed, killed and resurrected from the dead. And both halves, taken together, tell us that that the transfiguration is more than an advance-warning of what is ultimately going to happen to Jesus. Taken together the two halves tell us what Jesus is, here and now. He is both divinely

glorified and inescapably engaged in the reality of the pain and suffering of the world as it really is. And a spiritually healthy life is the one that holds the tension between those complementary aspects of who Jesus is correctly in balance. It is inspired by the mountain top experience of meeting with Jesus to serve the world as we find it. It's a spiritual life of two halves.

So, that's the transfiguration systematically dealt with. Q.E.D. Only, we're left with the thorny problem that in the middle of that scheme there is that little vignette of the other disciples not being able to heal the man's son whilst Jesus is swanning around up the mountain, demonstrating his glory to his favourites. Mere human beings, no matter how sincerely they love the Lord, are impotent until he returns.

To the New Testament writers this isn't a problem; because the consuming pre-occupation of the New Testament is the expectation of the imminent return of Jesus. To them the frankly rubbish nature of life

wasn't a long-term problem because they thought, in all probability, before we get to week on Tuesday, there will probably have been the second coming. Two thousand years later we know that they wrote from a mistaken historical perspective. We cannot present our faith in the expectation that the second coming is likely to be before a week on Tuesday. We can't say that Mosul and Aleppo and Donald Trump holding Teresa May's hand in the White House Rose Garden; we can't say all that stuff doesn't matter because we trust Jesus.

And so our problem is making sense of our faith which is revealed to us in scriptures that were written in a mistaken historical perspective.

Or is it? Perhaps the New Testament writers didn't have a mistaken historical perspective. Perhaps they had a re-aligned historical perspective! We're not left *waiting for* Jesus, like those also-ran disciples, sitting around at the bottom of the mountain trying to heal

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people in their own strength. Jesus is here. And the invitation of faith is to experience everything in the perspective of what has already been achieved by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The way to experience that is unashamedly through the emotions.

The great cry of the evangelist is to open your heart to Jesus. It is not: be persuaded that Jesus has a better political and economic programme. It is to give your heart to Jesus; be affected by him; make a conviction that from hereon in the starting point, the perspective through which everything else is viewed, is the assurance that his life, death and resurrection have saved the world.

And if that is our starting point, it makes us all the more impatient with the pain and suffering, the poverty and squalor, the exploitation, the anxiety and fear, the hatred and bigotry and misogyny and homophobia; and all that stuff; because we know that that is not how it's meant to be; because we have seen

a transfigured world. And we pray, we pray so hard that we might be sufficiently faithful in the way we engage with life that, unlike those disciples left waiting at the bottom of the mountain, for us the two halves may come to together so that we see the glory of God that is revealed in Jesus.

Amen.