

Sunday next before Lent 2021 (14.02.2021)

2 Kings 2: 1 – 12; Mark 9: 2 – 9

Here's a question for you. When did you first hear the term 'spoiler alert'? I began thinking about this when I started contemplating this morning's Bible readings. It's a term which, it seems to me, is in general usage. I guess we all know what it means - a spoiler alert is a warning that something is about to be revealed about the plot of a book or film – but it seems to me it's a term I've only heard used relatively recently.

Certainly my, admittedly antiquated, double volume dictionary has neither the term spoiler alert nor the word spoiler in it. I had to resort to Wikipedia to find out anything about it. And apparently it was first used in the early days of the internet – although I suppose that probably does make it 25 or more years old now. I'm told – and I quote directly from Wikipedia now – that spoiler “can also be used to refer to any piece of information regarding any part of a given media that a

potential consumer was not intended to know beforehand.” So in other words, it's a bad thing: you shouldn't give spoilers and, if you're going to, you should alert people.

Only, the story of the Transfiguration that we've heard this morning – the story of Jesus going up a high mountain, with three of his most trusted disciples, and being transfigured, dazzling white, talking to Moses and Elijah – that's a spoiler, but it's a good spoiler; a deliberate, constructive spoiler, used three different ways.

It's a spoiler for the participants in the narrative. Peter, James and John get a sneak preview and get let in on some inside information before it becomes generally known. In fact, when they're coming back down the mountain, Jesus gives them a spoiler alert: they're not to tell anybody what they've just found out. Never mind the early days of the internet: there's a spoiler alert in Mark chapter 9! Jesus “ordered them

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to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.” These three were privileged to know that Jesus, this itinerant healer and preacher man they’ve teamed up with, actually is as important, in fact more important, than the two giants of the story of God’s salvation in the Jewish scriptures, Moses and Elijah; and at the end of the story, however unlikely it may seem as events unfold, the full glory of God is going to be revealed and shine through Jesus.

As well as those three participants in the story, the reader of the Gospel also gets this spoiler. And it comes just half way through. There are 16 chapters in Mark’s Gospel. We read the first eight the first half, and then the first thing we get is this reassurance that everything is going to be all right. The reader is let in on the privileged information Peter, James and John have been granted.

And the story of the Transfiguration is used in the church’s calendar as a spoiler as well. The people who put together the lectionary – the three year scheme that directs us what Bible readings to read on what day – they set this reading on the Sunday next before Lent, the last Sunday before Ash Wednesday. And the story of the Transfiguration gives us something to cling on to; it peps us up as we embark on the journey into Lent. Because, in the next six weeks we’re going to be visiting some dark places.

We’re going to be invited to visit the dark recesses of our own souls, contemplating the human experience of wrestling with temptation, as we read of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness. We’re going to journey with Jesus through his darkest hours, as the excitement of Palm Sunday turns sour and he’s rejected, betrayed, mocked, scorned, tortured and crucified. And we’re going to be left in a place of spiritual darkness ourselves on Maundy Thursday when we leave the church deprived of God’s blessing

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and are bereft of the presence of Jesus through Good Friday and Holy Saturday as he hangs, spent, on the cross and we await the glory, the splendour, the dazzling light of the resurrection. And we're fortified to be able to embark on this crucially important, yet in the true sense of the word, dreadful journey through the darkness of Lent because this morning we have heard the story of transfiguration proclaimed. We are buoyed up with the knowledge that the spiritual discipline of observing a holy Lent is worth it because without it we are unable to behold the glory to which we are assured it leads.

This glimpse of the transfiguration and journey through Lent is a microcosm of the Christian life. We are vouchsafed the assurance of something which equips and empowers us to drive towards something not yet fully seen. That may take the form of a conviction about the afterlife; and may take the form of a conviction that there is more to this life, in the here and now, than its material reality. As we are

filled by Jesus giving his life for us we are given a quality of life which defies the power of darkness and gives us hope and purpose. We're following a story which shapes our lives. It gives us strength to endure lockdown, a commitment to serve one another and a goal to aim for.

And unlike the three favoured disciples who came down the mountain with Jesus after the Transfiguration, there's no spoiler alert. We're encouraged, we're commanded, to share that good news with others.

Amen.