

Time and Space ...

... for God, especially this Lent

A sermon given on the Sunday Next before Lent, 11th February 2024 – by Revd Canon Peter Wadsworth, in Beverley Minster

Mark 9:2-9

A couple of years ago, I watched a very powerful documentary which took a slightly different take on the events of 9/11. Basically, the documentary followed President Bush throughout that day. Everything that the president does is photographed, and so there was this record of everything that he did. And you may remember that powerful image of him sitting, listening to a group of primary school children and one of his secret service agents coming and whispering in his ear the first news of the attacks. And of course, the thing then to do was to get him back as quickly as possible to the relative safety of Air Force One and get that plane off the ground. But when he got back on the plane, he did something which you might think was really rather unexpected. There he was facing the greatest crisis that America had faced, probably since Pearl Harbour. And he went into his office, shut the door and told all his advisors and his generals and all these other people to give him ten minutes. And in that time he prayed and then he turned to deal with this great crisis.

Now, that may seem a rather strange way into a sermon on the Sunday before Lent, but it's almost a slightly tricky one for a preacher: what do you tell people? What do you advise people to do during Lent? Traditionally I know, it's been a case of saying, 'Well, you give something up for Lent. You give up chocolates or something like that.' But the trouble with that is that it's more about doing it for some other reason than for reasons to do with God - you give up chocolate to lose weight, or a friend of mine used to give up alcohol during Lent simply to prove that he was not addicted to it - it wasn't really terribly holy. And so there came a vogue a few decades ago and say what you tell people is to add something on, be positive, take on some extra service or more Bible reading or whatever it might be, or go on a lent course. Well, again, it can be a good thing to do, certainly nothing against it. But if you're saying that to already extremely busy people, it could just feel like adding a burden, an unneeded burden - and does it do any spiritual good?

And that leads me into the gospel, not the actual revelation itself, but how it happens. And that is that Jesus, it says, takes these three disciples 'apart' to a mountaintop for this vision of his glory. And I want to suggest to you this Lent the idea that we go 'apart' in some way, at some few moments of time, so we are able to be more attentive to God; we are able to make use of the time; not adding lots of extra practices, but just space, because it's space in which God can act. And we know that Jesus has had a much longer time 'apart' in the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry - a time when he is taken 'apart' in both senses: taken 'apart' - separated out from everybody else; taken 'apart' - internally to face who he is and what his mission is. And there are echoes in that and in the

transfiguration story that go much, much further back - to the story of the burning bush seen by Moses. And that says very clearly that Moses turns aside to go and look at the bush and therefore has that encounter with God.

So in all these things there is that sense of just creating a bit of space in order to give God time and space for what he wants to do. Now, we are very good at saying, 'Well, we've got no time, we're very busy.' Well yes, sometimes we are - depending on our circumstances in life, we may be very busy.

... I'll let you in on the secret. One of my things is that if I get stressed, it always seems to come out in my skin getting sore and all of that. And way back I remember going to see a consultant in Winchester in Hampshire, and he said to me, "Well, do you know what Saint Francis de Sales said?" And I looked slightly astonished, wasn't expecting that response. And I said, "No, go on, tell me." He said, "Well, Saint Francis de Sales said, 'If you are very busy, you should spend an hour a day in prayer; and if you are extremely busy, you should spend 2 hours a day in prayer.' " Now that's a council of perfection I know, but it says something very powerful about a need to come 'apart.'

And are we actually as busy as we make ourselves out to be? Or is it simply a question of reprioritising our time? George W. Bush found time even in that most appalling crisis, when the weight of the world was upon his shoulders - he found time to pray before he did anything else.

And time itself is a very funny thing - it sort of bends and twists and kind of extends or contracts depending upon our circumstances: If you've ever stood for the two minute silence on Remembrance Sunday, you will know just how long that can feel; I used to do a 'Thought for the Day' for a local hospital radio down in Hampshire, and I got two and a half minutes, that was all. You think, well, what could you possibly say in two and a half minutes? But actually, the answer was quite a lot if you thought carefully about it. But I think for me, the most powerful thing I've ever heard about the use of time and the way time works when we are dealing with other people was right back at the beginning of my ministry. We did something called post ordination training (which I have to tell you, we rather irreverent curates used to call potty training) and this one term we were doing pastoral care, and we spent a whole day with one of the senior hospital chaplains in the Oxford hospitals - he was one of the great figures - he wrote books about it; he was one of the great experts. And those were the days when a chaplain would go around and talk to everybody on a ward (doesn't happen like that today: you have to specifically ask for a visit from the chaplain. Chaplains can't just wander in and talk to everybody.) And we were a bit sceptical. We said, 'But look, walking around a ward, having a few minutes with each patient, surely you can't do much with that. It can't be much use.' And he said something which has been one of the guiding lights of my whole ministry when dealing with other people. He said, 'There is all the difference in the world between giving someone the impression I've **all** of five minutes, and giving someone the impression of I've **only** got five minutes.

So when I talk about giving space, giving time for God, this Lent, I'm not saying huge quantities of time: to use a modern phrase, I'm talking about 'quality time'; I'm talking about maybe a few minutes in the day when we stop our other activities and we focus on God - not doing anything particularly, but just quietly sitting in his presence. You may know that lovely old story of the French parish priest going into his church and every time he goes in, there's an old man sitting in the church just looking up at the cross, and he said, "Hope you don't mind my asking, but what do you do all this time?" And the old man replied, "Well, I just sit and look at Him and He looks at me." And I think that gives wisdom from a very simple source, but great wisdom.

And in a world which is so busy, not just busy in terms of the jobs we have to do, but busy in terms of information coming at us all the time, I think that's the most precious thing that we can give ourselves in Lent, not giving something up, not adding on something which is terribly onerous, but just a little time and a little space.

I began with a world crisis and the most powerful man in the world, George W Bush, on 9/11. Let me end with a much more humble and domestic story. It's one that comes from not that far from here, in Lincolnshire, in Epworth. Epworth rectory is where Charles and John Wesley were born and brought up. Now, it's quite a big house by modern standards, but it was very full - there were several children and also there were servants - but not the sort of servants who kind of waited on a lord and master and a lord and lady. Susanna Wesley their mother was very much a working housewife, a working housekeeper, and those were the days of long skirts and equally long aprons. And she would simply go and sit on a chair in the corner of the kitchen and throw her great apron over her head - and that was the sign that mother was praying and nobody disturbed her - even in the midst of that busy household, she had that time and space.

So, as we start Lent on Wednesday, don't so much ask, what can I do for God? What can I do to improve my spiritual life? But ask yourself, what might God want to do with me and for me this Lent?

And then give him just a little time and space apart for him actually to do it?

Reading Text

Mark 9:2-9

² Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, ³ and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. ⁴ And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. ⁵ Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' ⁶ He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷ Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!' ⁸ Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus. ⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.