

## **'Tragedy and Triumph' – A homily for the Sunday before Lent**

*2 Kings 2.1-12*

*Mark 9.2-9*

The stories before us in our Scriptures this morning are dramatic and daring, full of colour and miracle, powerful distillations of the work and purpose of the divine in the midst of his world. The first is a story of prophets, great wonder-workers who confront kings and princes with a vision of God's fiery justice and who work signs of judgement and critique when that justice is rejected. And the second is a mini-apocalypse, as the veil between heaven and earth is torn open and the powers of heaven are made manifest with prophetic word and mysterious sign. Both are scenes in which God's presence is powerfully affirmed, in the violence of a whirlwind and the chaotic parting of waters, or else in the glorified apparel of Jesus Christ, and the deep and dazzling cloud that overshadows.

I don't know about you, but I struggle at the moment to engage with such dramatic and miraculous encounters. In the middle of a third lockdown, the monotony of life is beginning to slightly get to me, with the same daily routine hardly ever broken up by anything new, or disrupted by any new encounter. Perhaps the dull greys of a British winter sky don't help much, but life does, at times, feel monochrome, uneventful, sapping even. Like the black and white boredom of Kansas, with Dorothy and Toto, I'm yearning for the technicolour magic of Oz.

But to see the prophet Elijah's story, or that of Jesus' own, only in terms of miraculous, mountain-top experiences, is to get things very wrong indeed. Elijah has to endure many years of drought and exile, facing up to the scarcity of his situation and the religious failure of himself and his people; and Jesus himself constantly faces rejection and almost deliberate misunderstanding, finally dying a criminal's death outside the city walls. But what is it these two stories of supposed miracle and triumph are attempting to tell us,

what lies at the heart of these dramatic and powerful narratives?

It makes sense to draw Elijah's and Moses' stories together, the two most famous prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures, both towering and compelling figures. Both of these interpret the prophetic vision as one of fiery justice and energetic freedom, calling out the unjust and despotic rulers of their day, and calling their people back to a faith that speaks of love for the neighbour and the embrace of the outcast and the widow. But both must also face up to their own failures and the painful reality of what it means to live in this world. An impetuous Moses kills an Egyptian and is forced to flee for his life, just as Elijah feels he is totally alone in the world and retreats to the desert to be fed by ravens. Even as these two receive, in part, a vision of God, it is not a resplendent vision of utter clarity or supreme glory. Instead, Moses sees only the mysterious 'backside' of God as he retreats back into the dark mystery of infinity; whereas Elijah is taught to look beyond the pyrotechnics of usual theophanies to understand that the real vision of God can only be seen by someone who's heart has been silently broken by the mystery of suffering and loss.

Indeed, Elijah's fiery ascent into the heavens in the passage before us is rather like Luke's portrayal of the ascension of Jesus at the end of his Gospel. Like the young prophet Elisha we stand before this Jesus as he departs as those caught between loss and expectation, grief and hope. And like Elisha, we dare to ask that God's work of justice and freedom, truth and compassion, in short his work of passionate love, seen most beautifully and perfectly in this Jesus, continues in some way in us, in our frail and fractured hands and on our stuttering and stammering lips. We dare to believe that this same God, at work in the tragedies and triumphs of this prophet's life, is still at work now in the triumphs and tragedies of our own.

It feels right that Elijah and Moses appear on the Mount of Transfiguration with Jesus. These two who knew so much of the triumph that life with God can bring, the heady ascent into the mountainous experiences of vision and faith, leading the people of God into renewal, glimpsing something of the beauty of his glory and majesty. But they also knew

that this same God sustained them in moments of monotony and failure, exile, grief, suffering and shame. Jesus himself is the sign of this God's commitment to us, an uncompromising commitment to be with us where we are, to hold us in triumph and tragedy, to walk with us in the dizzying heights of a technicolour and magical world, and to be our companion when all we sees are greys and blacks.

We often read Jesus' transfiguration as a glimpse of the resurrection, a manifestation of the heavenly light that will finally transfigure the whole of the cosmos, and indeed it is right to do so. But we are to be reminded also that Jesus' clothes which become 'dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them,' are the clothes of the martyr, the one who faces suffering and death in the hope of the final indestructibility of love. This love finds us wherever we are, on the mountain-tops with eyes straining to see the glorious mystery all around us, or in our lonely wanderings in the desert, seemingly lost and afraid. As the psalmist reminds us,

'where can I go from your spirit?  
or where can I flee from your presence?  
If I ascend into heaven, you are there;  
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.  
If I take the wings of the morning  
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,  
even there your hand shall lead me,  
and your right hand shall hold me fast.  
If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me,  
and the light around me become night,'  
even the darkness is not dark to you,  
the night is as bright as the day.'