

Exegetical Notes for March 2019

Our thanks to Archbishop Greg Kerr-Wilson for writing the Lectionary Notes this month.

March 3, 2019 – Transfiguration

Luke 9:28-36 (37-43a)

The context of Luke 9 is important, as the whole chapter, and particularly the transfiguration story, are a transition and the pivot point in Luke's Gospel. Jesus has already appointed the 12 apostles, but up until this point they simply accompany him, receiving his teaching and learning from him. In chapter 9 the apostles are sent out on their own for the first time, to preach, after Jesus has given them power and authority. After their return, we hear the story of Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ – and then the first instance where Jesus teaches the disciples that he is to suffer, be rejected, killed and then raised – with the admonition that they should also pick up their cross and follow. The transfiguration story begins with "eight days after these sayings..." After the transfiguration – verse 9:51 tells us that "When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem." The rest of the Gospel of Luke is all set in the context of his journey to Jerusalem and his passion there. This is the Last Sunday after the Epiphany before the beginning of Lent with its journey to the cross and resurrection.

In the story Peter's instinctive response to the experience is to build three dwellings – one for Jesus, one for Moses and one for Elijah. The suggestion is perhaps to linger or mark the spot of the encounter as a shrine. What might this say to us about how we respond to encounters with God in worship or life?

We are given a story of Jesus' glory revealed in advance of his "way of the cross" in which we are admonished to "listen to him" and shown figuratively that in Jesus both the law (Moses) and the prophets (Elijah) are about to be fulfilled in him through his cross and resurrection. How does this inform our reflection on scripture during our coming Lenten observance?

As Jesus prays "the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white." The three apostles are gifted with a vision of glory that prepares them for the coming events in Jerusalem. Are there "visions" that God is granting in our lives to encourage and lead us deeper in faith? How might we cultivate our ability to "see" beneath the surface of things to what God is revealing and which might sustain us through the trials of our daily lives?

March 10, 2019 – First Sunday in Lent

Luke 4:1-13

The story of Jesus's fasting and temptation in the wilderness takes place right after the story of his baptism. There are parallel connections here to the story of the transfiguration. In both, the voice from heaven declares Jesus to be God's son, and in each the declaration leads to a journey and struggle. Transfiguration leads into the journey to Jerusalem, the baptism leads to the temptations. The journey to Jerusalem is the journey of laying down his life physically; in the temptations, Jesus lays down the temptations of self in order to fulfill the ministry into which he is called.

The temptations in the wilderness are a parallel to the temptations of the people of Israel in their wilderness wanderings after the Exodus. While the people of Israel fall prey to their various temptations, Jesus in every instance withstands and is faithful to God's word. Showing himself to be the embodiment of what God intends God's people to be.

With each temptation Satan in some way challenges what it means for Jesus to be "the Son of God": to use that status to acquire basic needs for self; to have worldly power and authority; to take for granted that being Son of God means no harm will come. How do these temptations compare to the real story of Jesus' life, teaching and ministry?

Each of the temptations addresses a common human impulse: to see our needs as primarily met by physical provision rather than by God; to see our own power and the exercise of self-determination as the way to make the world what it ought to be; to assume that "if God loved us" nothing bad can happen regardless of our choices. How might we identify these impulses in ourselves during our Lenten observance and choose the way of Jesus instead?

March 17, 2019 – Second Sunday in Lent

Luke 13:31-55

The Gospel reading for the day is, in many bibles, referred to as Jesus's lament over Jerusalem. At its heart, however, is a return to the theme of Jesus resolutely journeying toward Jerusalem and his death. While it does indeed contain a lament, the focus of the passage is tied to the preceding one by the word "At that very hour..." In the preceding passage Jesus has spoken about entering "by the narrow door" and warned about entering upon it while the opportunity is still there. The warning about death threats from Herod serve as the occasion for Jesus to demonstrate his own faithfulness in entering by the narrow door. He will continue to perform his ministry and will indeed go to Jerusalem to be killed – death threats will not dissuade him. What are the things which dissuade us from following as disciples of Jesus? What pressures of society and world, or self-preservation, tempt us to draw back or seek an easier way?

Jesus's lament over Jerusalem focuses on his loving intent toward the people of Israel and his desire to bring them into the Kingdom – and the sometimes violent reactions which God's call to them often elicited. Where are the places in our lives where we object to and reject God's call upon us when it is not to our liking?

The words "you will not see me until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'" These words (Blessed is...) are from Psalm 118 and were likely sung to pilgrims as they entered Jerusalem on feast days. They are also the words sung at Jesus's entry into Jerusalem as the crowds greet him with palm branches. In Luke's account, it is the multitude of disciples who shout these words because of "all the mighty works that they had seen." (Lk. 19:37) To be gathered to Jesus means to believe in the work God has done and is doing through him. In what ways do we miss seeing the work of God that Jesus is doing in our lives to draw us "under his wings" – and how might we become more attentive and responsive to that work of love in our lives?

March 24, 2019 – Third Sunday in Lent

Luke 13:1-9

“Do you think these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way?” It was a common belief in Jesus day that people who suffered did so because of some grievous, perhaps unknown, sin. It is not an uncommon thought amongst some in our own context. Interestingly Jesus does not say that they didn’t sin, but rather affirms that all have sinned and are called to repentance. It is usually easier to see the sins of others than to see our own.

“Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” These words are not the words of Jesus that we prefer to call to mind. In fact, in a contemporary culture where we all want to be affirmed and reassured, we associate the real message of Jesus with “God so loved the world..” and “come unto me all you who carry heavy burdens....” The two are not opposites however, “God so loved...” that he gave Jesus to die for our sins; we come unto Jesus that he might lift the burdens of our own brokenness.

Repentance, while it may involve feeling badly and being sorry for what we have done “in thought, word and deed”, is not primarily about our emotional response, but about change of mind, heart and direction. How might we attend to the places in our lives that require repentance?

The barren fig tree parable speaks to the real meaning of repentance: the man who owns the fig tree “came seeking fruit on it....” To repent means not only turning away from sinful actions and thoughts, but to turn toward those things which are good. Our faith is to lead to good works enabled by the grace of God; as we open ourselves to the working of the Holy Spirit, God grows in us the fruit of love, joy, peace, etc (Galatians 5:22-23). Better than personal affirmation, the Gospel declares God’s love and grace – and invites us into personal transformation. How might we work to be open to God’s transforming grace this Lent?

March 31, 2019 – Fourth Sunday in Lent

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

The parable of the prodigal son is rightfully well known and remembered. It's depiction of the fallen son who turns his back on his father and family, and squanders his inheritance, but who then "came to himself", acknowledges his sin and returns repentant to his father, is one of the simplest and beautifully told stories of love, grace and reconciliation. Perhaps it moves us because somewhere deep down we are aware of our own failings, and long for, and are drawn to, the God Jesus shows us - who not only welcomes back the wandering, but celebrates our return with joy. Do we have the honesty to recognize our own prodigal behavior – and the courage and confidence to seek forgiveness?

The story is introduced with the grumblings of the Pharisees: "This man receives sinners and eats with them." The prodigal son parable is told in response – and despite the touching beauty of the younger son's return, it is likely that the real "punch line" of the parable is the story of the older son who grumbles at the return of the younger and that the father is in fact eating with, indeed feasting with, the "sinner". The parable contrasts the father's love and grace with the resentful and sullen behavior of the older brother – indicting the Pharisees in their grumbling – but also inviting them to share in the example of the father by imitating his forgiveness and mercy. Are we aware of the subtle judgements we make towards others about who is worthy and who is not? How might we turn away from those judgements and share the open-armed welcome of God.

The main thrust of the parable is the relationship of people to God – the welcoming of sinners by the God who forgives and loves. However, the story also challenges us to consider those who have sinned against us; those who have hurt us, betrayed us or wronged us in any number of ways. The touching love and grace of the father in the story shows us not only the character of God, but also the character that those who are made in God's image are meant to grow into. Can we, through prayer and mutual encouragement, learn to forgive the way that God forgives us?