

A sermon preached on the Sunday next before Lent 2017. Ps 99; 2 Peter 1: 16-end; Matt. 17: 1-9

A first for me this morning, as I'm guessing it'll be for you too. It's not often on the Sunday next before Lent, I suspect, that Fawlty Towers is extolled from the pulpit. I love Fawlty Towers. If any of you would like to borrow my DVD, please do let me know. I've been skimming through episodes of Fawlty Towers this week, and it's certainly brightened me up. I've been trying to find the scene my preparations for today made me think of. You may well know it (and if you don't know it, it's worth a Google - google 'Sybil Fawlty Oh I knoww').

Basil and Sybil are sitting up in bed. They're in separate beds with a bedside table between them. Basil's in pyjama's with a nightcap on his head, and he's doing his best to read Jaws. Sybil's her hair is in rollers. She's in a silky purple night robe. She's reading a magazine and working her way through a box of chocolates. She's smoking. The 'phone rings, and Sybil answers it:

'Oh I know... Oh I know... Oh I know... He didn't! Oh I know... He doesn't deserve you Audrey, he really doesn't. Oh I know... Oh I know...' And so it goes on. Basil gets more and more frustrated, and then the doorbell rings. Basil says something to Sybil but she ignores him. He goes off to answer the door.

Most of us have a Sybil in us. Most of us know a Sybil or a Basil. There's definitely a lot of Basil in me. There's quite a bit of Sybil. That's why it's funny.

If something in you resonates with that, today's Gospel reading might offer some encouragement.

Today's Gospel reading begins with three words. It begins with what could be seen as a throw-away line. It begins with the words 'Six days later'. The question we should be asking is what's just happened? What's Matthew referring to? What happened six days before the Transfiguration he's about to describe?

Six days earlier, Peter found out he didn't know as much as he thought he did.

The event Matthew records just before today's Gospel passage comes is what happens at Caesarea Philippi. It's Peter's confession of Christ. Jesus asks his disciples who people say he is, and then he asks them who *they* say he is. Peter's the one who responds. Peter says what he knows: 'You are the Christ, the holy one of God'. Jesus praises him for it: 'Blessed are you, Simon son of John, for flesh and blood have not revealed this to you, but my Father In heaven'.

But what happens next? Jesus tells his disciples what his fate will be: he will go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter takes him aside and begins to rebuke him: 'God forbid it, Lord. This must never happen to you'. And Jesus says to Peter, 'Get behind me Satan... you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things'. In other words, 'Peter, you *don't* know', Peter, you haven't got a clue'. In Peter there's a mix of what he knows and what he doesn't know. And it's after that that today's Gospel comes.

Jesus takes with him Peter, James and John. He takes three of the four disciples who were the first to be called, so three of the four disciples you'd think would know him best - the three who've been with him the longest. And he takes them up a high mountain. He takes them to a place of revelation. All through Scriptures, mountains are places where amazing things happen.

And at the top of this mountain, Jesus is transfigured before them. 'His face shone like the sun, his clothes became dazzling white'. The disciples see Jesus in a way they've never seen him before. They see him as the God described in the psalm the choir have just sung to us: 'The Lord is king, let the people's tremble, He is throned upon the cherubim, the earth quakes. The Lord is great in Zion...' Jesus is the man the disciples think they know, and suddenly they don't know him at all.

The vision is so mind-blowing that Peter's knocked for six - knocked for six for the second time in six days, poor man. He starts wittering: 'Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish I'll make three tents, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah'. Mark and Luke explain why he's wittering. 'He didn't know what to say,' Marks says, 'for they were terrified'.

Peter's come up close to a mystery he can't understand.

And then a voice comes from heaven: 'This is my Son, the beloved; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him'. Listen to him - listen to Jesus. Open your minds, in other words, not to human things but to divine things. Open your minds to the God who is mystery - open your minds to the God you barely know.

Now it's no co-incidence, it seems to me, that today's Gospel reading is set for the Sunday before Lent begins. In Lent we journey with Jesus through the desert. We enter the wilderness with him. We think of the desert as a place of hardship, a place of scarcity, a place of going without; and we're quite right to think like that, because that's one aspect of what the desert is.

But we need to remember that in the Bible the desert is more than that. The desert in the Bible is a place of encounter. It's a place of encounter with God.

That comes over most obviously in the Book of the Prophet Hosea. In Hosea, Israel is portrayed as an unfaithful partner. God says about Israel, 'I am going to lure her into the wilderness and speak to her heart... I will speak tenderly to her... There she shall respond as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt'. 'I'm going to woo her', in other words. 'I'm going to take her to the desert and know her again'. Know her in the Scriptural sense of the verb to 'know'. Think of Mary who says at the Annunciation 'How can this be, since I know not a man', and Genesis where Adam 'knows' his wife Eve and they have Cain and Abel. Knowledge in the Bible is about intimacy. It's not about knowledge on a cerebral level. The desert in the Bible is the place of restoration and renewal. It's the place where we know and are known - the place where we know and are known as if for the first time.

So as we begin Lent this week, how might we make that happen? How can we make this Lent a time when we come to know God better? Come to know God as he is in Jesus Christ?

You've been given, I hope, a plethora of material as you've come in this morning - information about Lent Groups and the Monday evening 'Exploring Prayer' sessions, and everything else that's on offer this Lent. All these things are designed to help us know God more deeply. I'm well aware, though, that groups aren't everybody's thing. A lot of them aren't really my thing, if I'm honest - though it never hurts to give things a go.

If you do nothing else this Lent, I'd suggest you do one thing. Take some time to read the Bible. Get more familiar with this book.

I say that on the back of today's first reading - that marvellous passage from 2 Peter Glenda read just now. Peter's writing about the transfiguration: 'We had been eyewitnesses of his majesty', he says. 'I was there', in other words. That's what he's saying. Now critics differ in their opinions about whether it's the real Peter writing or whether it's someone else; someone writing in Peter's name as would've been accepted literary practice at the end of the first century; someone who would've known Peter or at least have known people who knew him, and who was writing as though he was him. But who precisely wrote these words isn't really the point. The point is that in the Bible, in the New Testament, we have the words - the words inspired by the Holy Spirit - of people who lived in and around the time of Jesus Christ - people who knew Jesus Christ in a way that we can never know him this side of the grave. People who knew Jesus as he walked this earth, or if they didn't know him personally, probably knew people who did. These people have got something to teach us. What they've got to say is worth reading.

I say that with one caveat. These words were written, don't forget, around 2000 years ago. We'd not pick up any other book written 2000 years ago and expect to understand it straight away. We had an example in our Gospel reading two weeks ago of a passage crying out for interpretation: the passage where Matthew has Jesus say 'if your right hand causes you to sin cut it off', followed by his teaching on divorce. Those words were written in a time, in a culture and in a context that are absolutely not our own. We need to be careful how we interpret them.

What I'd recommend is a Bible with notes in it - notes at the bottom of the page which help us understand the text. Get hold of what's called a 'study Bible'. Get hold of a translation whose language is comprehensible. 'Study Bible' makes it sound heavy, but it doesn't have to be. It's simply a Bible with pointers - pointers to help us make sense of what it's saying.

If we do that - if we take time to read a little of the Bible each day this Lent - we might come some way to deepening our knowledge of God - deepening our knowledge of the God who knows us completely, but who in this life, says St Paul, we know only in part - God who has known us since before we were born, and who one day we will see face to face.

I'm going to end with a prayer of St Anselm:

*Lord, teach us to seek Thee,
and reveal Thyself to us when we seek Thee.
For we cannot seek Thee unless Thou teachest us,
nor find Thee unless thou revealest Thyself.
Let us seek Thee in longing.
Let us long for Thee in seeking.
Let us find Thee in love,
and love Thee in finding.
Amen.*