

Well, last Friday it was St David's day. We saw evidence of a healthy kind of national pride – strengthened no doubt by last weekend's result in the Six Nations clash between Wales and England. Wales are currently sitting pretty at the top of the table, looking down on their neighbours – who are all being propped up (as usual!) by Italy.

Whether it is from the top of a table, the top of a building, or the top of a mountain, there is something special about the view from a vantage point. A recurring theme in the Bible is that it is on top of a mountain that one can feel closer to God. We saw that in our first reading today. Moses' encounter with God on Mount Sinai made his face shine – calling to mind those wonderful words from what we know as Aaron's blessing: '...The Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up the light of his countenance upon you...'. As the psalmist says, 'In God's light we see light'.

And it was on the top of another mountain, thought to be Mount Tabor, that our gospel account of the Transfiguration took place. This time, Jesus' face shone, revealing his glory, and it is no accident that in the lectionary this reading is chosen especially for today: the Sunday before the beginning of Lent. Whilst the account we heard, from Luke's gospel, is very similar in Matthew and Mark it is Matthew who spells out to us that 'From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem ...and be killed, and on the third day be raised'. Luke meanwhile uses this poignant phrase, 'From that time on he set his face to go to Jerusalem'.

You see, it was that same face that had first been Transfigured on the mountain: a God-given glimpse of Jesus' future glory: glory that could only come through suffering.

Now whilst we might question why there is so much suffering in the world, most of it unjust of course, we do know that it was necessary for Jesus to suffer. Lent is the season we enter in to that suffering of Jesus, that 'redemptive suffering' which we call his Passion. We walk with him for a season, as we learn again that there was and is no limit to his self-giving love for us. So, before we begin our walk with Jesus through Lent, 'it is good for us' to hear again about the glory that would come through his suffering.

But in thinking why it was necessary for Jesus to suffer there are some who say that he willingly took upon himself the punishment which our sinful nature deserves. Others cannot see God as being vengeful by nature. They prefer rather to see Jesus' death on a cross as the ultimate proof, as I indicated earlier, that there was and is no limit to his self-giving love for us.

I hope you can tell which side of the fence I am on here! And this conviction

was reinforced the other day when I heard a priest movingly tell the story of his own faith journey, his own pilgrimage.

This priest, now in his mid-sixties has been in ministry in Bradford for many years. He initially came across to us as confident, indeed, as a bit of a 'showman'! But he revealed that all his life he had suffered from depression, with an inner voice constantly telling him he was no good, that he was failing to measure up. He also said that one day he came to realise that this voice could never be 'of God' – for a God of love would never say such a thing to one of his beloved children. Once the priest had realised this he felt better able to cope when the next onslaught came.

So as we prepare to enter in to a sustained reflection on the redemptive suffering of our risen and ascended Saviour, let us never lose sight of his glory. That glory is graphically portrayed at the centre of our beautiful east window. Immediately below, is the central image of our reredos: Christ on the cross. This contrast surely shows us that *any* suffering can be redeemed by the God of love. So in preparing for our journey through Lent, may we never lose sight of God's generous invitation to each of us to share in the glory of our risen and ascended Lord.

I began by mentioning St David, whose feast day was Friday. Less well-known is St Chad whose feast day was yesterday. He evangelised the vast central region of England once known as Mercia, and the magnificent cathedral at Lichfield is dedicated to him. Chad is also linked to these parts, having been educated under Aidan at Lindisfarne – and having succeeded his brother Cedd as Abbot of Lastingham in Ryedale.

Cedd meanwhile had evangelised East Anglia and is very much the 'patron saint' of Essex. Having spent six happy years there I can assure you that Essex is not flat and boring – and that it is much drier than here! Indeed, the local Royal Horticultural Society Gardens near Chelmsford feature many plants which thrive in desert conditions.

Can you see where this is going? Today, we are looking ahead to Lent, the season we remember Jesus' forty days *in the desert*. This immediately followed his baptism – when as with the Transfiguration a voice came from heaven, this time declaring 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased'.

Jesus' forty days in the wilderness was his time of preparation for his public ministry, but it was at his baptism that he finally knew himself to be called and equipped as God's beloved Son.

At our baptism we too become God's children, his 'beloved' in whom he is well pleased – and this very much includes our priest from Bradford, and you and me! At our baptism we too receive our commission as Christians to

follow the example of our Lord and in our turn to 'make disciples of the nations'. So let's use the next forty days to grow in our knowledge and love of God, and to become better prepared for the particular form of ministry to which God has called us, by name.

Perhaps we could start by staying on for today's Baptism Service, at which we will be welcoming four candidates; four new members of Christ's Church; four fellow pilgrims on the journey of faith. It would be lovely to welcome them and their families into the 'household of faith'. As we say in these parts, all are welcome.

Thanks be to God. Amen.