



## Living an expectant life and living it now

As you've heard, today is the Feast of the Transfiguration, that amazing and mysterious story of Jesus going to the top of Mount Tabor which is in the north of modern day Israel, in Galilee, about 10 miles from the Sea of Galilee itself. The story goes that he takes his closest friends up there and while they are there, Jesus's appearance changes, he kind of shines. It is a deep and mystical experience that they don't totally understand except to say that it makes them want to stay there for ever. Peter says actually, *let's stay here; we'll build you a shelter Jesus; let's just stay here; this is where it's at. This is it.*

I guess maybe many of us have had some kind of experience like that, a sudden sense that, fundamentally, life is good; that fundamentally you will do anything for another person, or that your focus is just right; or that you are in the right place. These senses go beyond feelings (and they rarely last) but sometimes there are these direct experiences that seem to go deeper than the physical circumstances or usual swirl of feelings that make up every day.

However fleeting, sometimes these kinds of moments do change the direction of our lives. I wouldn't be a priest without such an experience about 25 years ago, a quiet, rather inexplicable moment that didn't last in itself, something I still don't quite understand, but was somehow a fundamental "yes" to life that set me on a path that means I'm here in front of you today.

And in today's gospel (not the transfiguration reading) because we are today beginning to read through the gospel of Luke over the next two months; in today's reading, we heard such an experience from Mary, a kind of fundamental manifesto for living according to God. It's exuberant, full of delight and promise and begins with a delightedly open-hearted shout, *My soul; My soul; magnifies; my spirit; my spirit rejoices.* It's a gigantic yes to life and living –

Suddenly this young woman, Mary, can see that life can be just and beautiful. She says God has regarded her, God sees her, God gazes at her.

She says that God's way is not the way of the world, which values money and power over everything else. God has put down the mighty from their seat. God has exalted the humble and meek, and filled the hungry with good things. It's a song of revolution that comes from this young pregnant woman whose priorities, as many pregnant women find, change in an instant.

In putting these two themes together, the transfiguration mystical experience at the top of the mountain and this amazing song of Mary's as she accepts the life in front of her that God's offering her, I'm not talking about "magic moments", or big life-changing decisions in themselves. Some of you might be sitting there thinking, 'Well I've never had that kind of God revelation so I must not be doing it properly or I'm not good enough.' If anyone is thinking that I implore you to stop!

What I am suggesting is that part of the way of life that we are choosing, by belonging to a church and wanting to live out our faith as Christians, however tentatively or cautiously, is that we choose to live expectantly, as a way of life. We live expectant of transfiguration, open hearted and open minded; ready, like Mary, to sing; expecting miracles every day and, vitally, in this expectant life, remaining willing to go to places of hurt, disgrace, distress and pain both within ourselves and with others, knowing that there we will encounter the reality of God too deep for words.

Expectant is a word we only generally use for women who are actually pregnant. But I am claiming this way of living for all of us, women and men, pregnant or not. The first two chapters of the Gospel of Luke that we were discussing this morning and that gives us the gospel for today is all about birth. Some of you here have been pregnant, many have not. Some of you have wanted to be and haven't been, others have never wanted to be. But all of us have been born. And the fundamental experience of being born and dying, whatever happens in-between, is something that connects all of us.

I had an experience of this expectant way of living this week which had little to do with church, but everything to do, I thought, with God and life. I had been asked to help an actor whose play is in rehearsal, with his character; because he was playing a character who, out of the blue, hears the voice of God. And so, this week, I found myself in a rehearsal room in Islington watching a run through of the new play "Against" which is shortly to be playing at the Almeida theatre. It's quite a political play, presenting a critical assessment of contemporary American society with particular reference to gun violence, but at the core of it, are complex and subtle observations about the struggles we humans have with intimacy (with one another and with God). In a thoroughly secular context, with actors at work and a director, production team all working hard, taking notes, getting stuff wrong, forgetting lines, I found myself lost in the story which, in its artifice, told a deep truth.

It was one of those weird moments too as I realised that the lead character, the one I was supposed to be giving some insight about, was called Luke. But the idea is that this guy, a Silicon Valley billionaire, one day hears clearly a voice which tells him "Go where there's violence". He then goes on a quest, gives up his companies, and starts visiting places where violence has taken place: a school shooting, a college campus after a rape case. He then begins to see that in his terms, much of contemporary society is based in violent interactions and relationships. And so, he starts to visit exploited workers in a factory, he gets into animal welfare. People start to treat him either as a Messiah or a pariah. Many start to recognise that there is something deeply, deeply true about what he is saying. Some realise that the cost of change will be almost too much to bear, and so they reject his message, while at the same time turning up in crowds to hear him. The play brought me to tears several times as it tries to navigate really difficult personal topics and resolutely avoids clichés. On a lighter note, I did congratulate the actors afterwards who had to act out a rather steamy sex scene with a vicar watching them barely six feet away! They did say that had been a bit of a stretch but what I realised as I walked away from the rehearsal room was that yes it had been a rehearsal but it had also been something real, in the moment. We had all been required to open our hearts to one another and to the challenges the play presented. And we had been confronted by the playwright and the actors with our own deepest struggles to be intimate, to be generous, to be able to compromise, to be able to connect. In the moment; in the room.

At its best, this is what liturgy, church services, can be. Rehearsals for the deeper and greater reality of eternity. But not just rehearsals, because we are living through this moment in reality; *enacting* in this moment...right now...the open heartedness and living expectantly that is at the heart of Jesus's life and Mary's song.

Our commitment to remain open to life's depths will take us to places of both joy and despair in ourselves, the agony of living becomes more apparent as much as the delight. And so, it requires us to be brave, to be brave to go there and not run away.

In reading Luke's gospel, in coming to share this Eucharist, by being part of this church, by attempting to live your life as a follower of Christ, I invite you to be brave. And stay open to the living and the dying that is yours, that is ours. Whatever it takes, and it gets harder as life's experiences close in, whatever it takes, don't close up. Live expectant lives, knowing that however hard we work, or however hard we try, we will not, in the end, take control of everything; we will come to realise more and more profoundly that when we choose to live life on tiptoe, we are asked to trust God more and more and more, never knowing what will happen next. I close with a poem by Mary Oliver I have read once before – it captures this sense of transfiguration, of open heartedness to the pain and the joy of the world as it is. It's about birds called loons which have a haunting exuberant song.

Here is a story  
to break your heart.  
Are you willing?  
This winter  
the loons came to our harbor  
and died, one by one,  
of nothing we could see.  
A friend told me  
of one on the shore

that lifted its head and opened  
the elegant beak and cried out  
in the long, sweet savoring of its life  
which, if you have heard it,  
you know is a sacred thing,  
and for which, if you have not heard it,  
you had better hurry to where  
they still sing.

And, believe me, tell no one  
just where that is.

The next morning  
this loon, speckled  
and iridescent and with a plan  
to fly home  
to some hidden lake,  
was dead on the shore.

I tell you this  
to break your heart,  
by which I mean only  
that it break open and never close again  
to the rest of the world.

*Lead* by Mary Oliver

#### Bibliography

Oliver, Mary *New and Selected Poems, Vol 2* Beacon Press, Massachusetts 2007