

St Mary's, Dorchester, Sunday 15th February 2026 – i.e. the Sunday next before Lent

Exodus 24:12-end

2 Peter 1:16-end

Matthew 17:1-9

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It's good to know where we're coming from. Last Sunday all of our readings were about creation, and the place of human beings within creation. We chose music that reflected those readings, and Richard spoke about our human response, especially our duty of care towards our fellow creatures.

Having a Sunday service dedicated to creation in this part of the year might seem strange. I learned recently that the Revised Common Lectionary – the pattern of Bible readings we normally use here – almost never includes the creation stories. The Church of England noticed that; and so when the Church adopted the lectionary it introduced a set of readings about creation just before Lent to make sure we hear more of those stories on a Sunday morning. It seems like a positive change.

It's good to know where we're coming from. It's also good to know where we're going.

The season of Lent begins later this week. The tradition is that we get together on Ash Wednesday and receive “the imposition of ashes”, which is a fancy way of saying we get the sign of the cross thumbed on our foreheads with ash. It isn't really an imposition – it's a reminder, a reminder of where we're coming from and where we're going. The minister who makes the sign of the cross says, “Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return; turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ”. Sin is all about separation: sin includes everything that separates us from God, from our neighbour, and from the person God calls us to be. If we are to overcome sin, to become the people God created us to be, we need help; and knowing that there's something wrong is the first step towards accepting that help.

Lent is a great opportunity; I encourage you to use it well. If you'd like some ideas, I'd be happy to help.

So, between the readings about creation last Sunday and all the talk about dust we're going to hear on Wednesday, we have a sense of where we're coming from and also where we're going. On its own, that story of creation and annihilation sounds like a closed circle: we come from dust, and we

go back to dust. And in fact lots of secular thinkers have embraced that closed circle. Writers like Philip Pullman have popularised the idea. They make it sound a bit nicer by saying that we're made out of *stardust* rather than regular dust, and that we become stars when we die. If you ask me that sounds like special pleading – annihilation is still annihilation, wherever your molecules end up.

“Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.” Thankfully there's a lot more to Christianity than that closed circle. In between last Sunday's reflections about creation and the recollection of our earthly fate this Wednesday, today we have something completely different: a window onto our final destiny.

We are never given any information in the Gospels about what Jesus normally looks like. But here, on the Mount of Transfiguration, we are told that he looks different. “[H]is face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white” [Matthew 17:2]. Let's be clear: the Gospel writers are utterly uninterested in Jesus' appearance, here or anywhere else. They're telling us that Jesus looks different in this story because the change teaches us something about who he is the rest of the time.

So who is this Jesus? According to our tradition, Jesus is the one to whom the Law and Prophets testify. Any one of Jesus' peers could have told you that Moses and Elijah go up mountains to speak to God. And here they are on the mountain speaking with Jesus. In case that was too subtle, a voice heaven helpfully removes any ambiguity. Jesus is God the Son: for a little while lower than the angels, but soon to be crowned with his Father's glory.

Jesus is transfigured before the disciples to show us who he is. He is also transfigured to show us who we are to be. I can see why we have been given this bit of the Second Letter of Peter to read this morning. But if I were going to choose a bit of one of Peter's letters to go with this Gospel I would have chosen his first letter instead. In it Peter writes,

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. [1 Peter 1:3-5]

What we see on the Mount of Transfiguration is a preview of the Ascension. I call it a preview rather than a spoiler: it's the opposite of a spoiler, a sign that we are on the right track, that it is

worth us persisting to the end. No wonder Peter wants to stay where he is.

The Transfiguration is a flash-forward to the life which we in Christ will one day enjoy. The Orthodox Churches are a lot more straightforward in what they say about our future life: they call it *theosis*, which means divinisation. There's something refreshingly bold about the teaching that we will be like God. Those who are baptised into Jesus Christ are baptised into his life and his death. As the baptised emerge from the water, they are raised to share in Jesus' resurrected life, which as Peter says, is “imperishable, undefiled and unfading” – a living hope.

“Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.” Except that returning to dust is only the beginning. When you imagine the story that we will be following over the coming months – Jesus' temptation; his Passion, death and Resurrection; and his Ascension after forty days – that story is also our story. Through faith, through sharing in the Sacraments, through the never-ending journey of sanctification, we are becoming like him. We suffer like him; we die like him; we shall be raised and glorified like him.

It's good to know where we're coming from, and it's good to know where we're going. My brothers and sisters, I pray that strengthened with the knowledge of God's eternal love and purposes for us, we may enter the season to come with boldness, looking towards the great salvation that God has prepared for us in Jesus Christ. Amen.