

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost 2018 - Evensong

Thank you Fr John for inviting me to come among you this evening, I bring you greetings from St Philip's, O'Connor and assure you all of our prayers as you embark on other chapter in the history of St Paul's, Manuka.

'Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.' Words of Peter from his first letter, important words. We know how difficult it is sometimes to give an account of the hope that is ours and Peter, of all people, knows that difficulty, he looms large over today's gospel readings both this morning and this evening.

The Synod of the diocese sat last weekend and along with the important business of the diocese and its administration there were motions and notices concerning the wider issues of our day. The erosion of compassion, climate change, indigenous recognition, inequality, the ongoing issue of Palestine. These are issues in which we continue to find it difficult to speak, they are complex there are deeply held views. But speak we must.

Jewish folk around March each year celebrate the festival of Purim. They dress up, they dance, they feast and the wine flows freely; all this to commemorate the events described in the Book of Esther which we heard this evening. A book which describes the foiling of a genocidal plot by Haman the wicked prime minister in the court of King Ahasuerus. His plan to eradicate the Jewish people is brought undone through the intercession of Queen Esther and her guardian Mordecai. The festival, although a minor one in the Jewish calendar, remains popular. For many Jewish folk today the celebration of Purim evokes memories of their near extermination in the 20th century. Haman and Hitler are spoken of in the same sentence. It is a celebration of the defeat of evil and a reminder of the ongoing faithfulness of Adonai. The book is an interesting one in that in its original Hebrew, which we find in the Biblical Canon, it does not mention God. Luther didn't care for it and wanted to throw it into a river claiming it was full of heathenish foolishness. John Wesley was more sympathetic he wrote of it: 'The name of God is not found in this book: but the finger of God is.'

At the Eucharist this morning we heard a pivotal text in Mark's account. Indeed it is an important text in the all synoptic gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke. Jesus on the road to Caesarea Philippi puts a question to his disciples: 'who do you say that I am?' In all three versions of the story it is Peter who speaks up 'you are the Messiah of God.' Jesus goes on tell them what this means: arrest, suffering, death. And with that awful revelation ringing in their ears Jesus, takes his closest disciples to the Mount of Transfiguration and the event that we heard read this evening.

Those of you who were here last time I was invited to preach may recall that I am a fan of British comedy. One of my favourite characters is Bernard Black of the sitcom Black Books. Black is sad individual who drinks and smokes far too much, he is generally unpleasant to his customers, friends and family and as a consequence is a very lonely character. One evening sitting alone he is visited

by two gentlemen from one of those religious groups who enjoy knocking on doors. He invites them in, they are astonished. They don't know what to say, we've never been invited in before! We've not planned for this! I feel a little like this tonight; I have never been invited back before and I don't know what to say! But seriously, this is Peter's dilemma on the road to Caesarea Philippi and on Mount Tabor, he doesn't know what to say.

His declaration on the road is right, but he doesn't understand what it means to call Jesus the Messiah and he earns Jesus' rebuke when he pushes back against suffering and death. Then along with James and John he is invited in to the inner sanctum. It is as if Jesus needs to explain himself. Peter encounters Jesus, Moses and Elijah, and the shekinah, the glory of God and again he does not know what to say, there is no script for this. But then he realises what needs to be done. Shekinah also means dwelling, God's very dwelling and presence; Peter says let's build three of them to hold on to the moment forever, and you can hardly blame him! Peter has found a way to overcome the evil forces at work against Jesus. These two in Hebrew tradition personify a holy war against evil. If Peter can hold on this moment all will be well. But this not the way; the next time Jesus has two people each side of him he has been crucified and among his last words are Elio, Eloi, lema sabachtani, my God, my God why have you forsaken me? Yes, Peter has been given a glimpse of the defeat of evil, but understandably he cannot grasp how it will be achieved. The Transfiguration is described as the foundation of all Christian theology. In it we see the true nature and potential of Jesus and we can see in Moses and Elijah, the law and the prophets, the meaning of the cross the defeat of all evil, of all that keeps humanity from God.

The issues of our day require us to speak out and speak out we must. During the week I have been in conversation with a Jewish friend about the Feast of Purim. She said to me, thinking about Esther, that the theme of the feast is that if God's will is to be carried out then the Jewish people have the responsibility to act. I thought this was very true in our context too, but there is more for us. Whilst we called to speak and act we are also called acknowledge that it has all been done for us in the cross. It is enough, living in gratitude for the gift given by Christ's death and it's power is revealed in our seeking, day by day, to let that Cross live and work in us as we carry the cross putting away our self-defending, self-justifying, self-protecting habits in every area of our lives. Because this is what is preventing us from potently speaking and acting into those issues of our day.

It is in this way that we can give a reason for the hope that is within us. Amen.