

LET'S DO IT!

PREACHER : Canon Neil Thompson, Precentor

Sunday, February 14th 2010
The Sunday Next Before Lent

10.30am
Rochester Cathedral

...even educated fleas do it.

Now I hope you know what I am talking about! I am quoting Cole Porter from his song, *Let's do it...*

*...birds do it, bees do it
Even educated fleas do it
Let's do it, let's fall in love*

And of course today, the 14th February is Valentine's Day and all the world around knows it – the shops are full of reminders with overpriced roses, lascivious chocolates, schmaltzy cuddly toys and lovers' menus in restaurants.

Yes, it's all there in the High Street and I expect some of us have sent or received a card or perhaps, looking at the choir, ...many cards!!!!

Some of us men may of course have forgotten: evidently the retail trade sees a 40% downturn when Valentine's Day falls on a Sunday because the strategically placed card and flower sellers on stalls outside offices and inside railway stations are out of the loop for the forgetful male!

Nevertheless, romance is wonderful; falling in love – there is nothing like it.

Sadly, it does have its limitations. For one thing you can't turn it on – it either happens or it doesn't; the chemistry of attraction is not of our making.

And then, we not only fall in love but we fall out of it too, or romance in its full flush and heady madness begins to wear a bit thin in the face of chores and routines, crises and calamity.

Love stories are fantastic but living happily ever after involves much more than romance.

Love has to face the challenge of the world in war and poverty, injustice and neglect, and exploitation, cruelty and death itself.

Love has also to face the flaws of our own personalities and those in the character of our beloved.

For Christians this challenge is an intrinsic part of loving God for we show that love by loving our neighbour as ourselves.

And that is why on this Sunday next before Lent, our readings take us far beyond the glow of romantic love into the strange, disturbing and even dangerous glory of God and his presence.

We in the Church of England know only too well the difficulties and struggle of living in love and unity.

Faith and hope and love are no easy fix whether it be with the way that we organise ourselves as a world or as a church, or in our preferences and demands in worship and self-expression.

From the terrors of Afghanistan and Haiti,
the atrocities in Zimbabwe, Somalia and Darfur,
the cruel repression in Tibet and Burma

to the tolerance and comfort and complacencies that characterise the dangers of democratic and prosperous societies and the diffusion and diversity of Anglicanism, life needs more than rose-tinted spectacles.

And today's scripture readings address this very issue of appearance and substance, of glory and perception.

For Moses and for Jesus, the glory of God changes their appearance – for in and around them God's presence is intensified as the normal realities of experience fall away.

Both scenes are filled with light; both scenes are related to the remote exposure of the mountain top and the overshadowing cloud that signified the presence, the *shekinah*, of the living God.

When we are taken to our limits and stretched, we are more likely to be open to the mysterious power that lies beyond our reach, our understanding and our control.

In the Old Testament reading from Exodus, Moses has climbed Mount Sinai to receive the Law and when he returns his face is so radiant and changed that he has to veil it before the sight of the people.

The gospel passage is St Luke's account of Jesus' transfiguration on Mount Hermon, and the glory of the future – the Son of Man's rule at the end of the age, is revealed in this extraordinary episode to Peter and James and John.

Jesus' face shines *like the sun* (just like Moses' face because he had been talking with God); and Jesus' garments become *white as light*.

Now the light that shines here is not merely a physical one – this is an inner light, a radiance that is spiritual.

Light as we know it is a natural energy is relative to its absence which we call darkness.

Religious experience has used this image to convey the light of God but that light is utterly different for it also incorporates its physical opposite – darkness.

And it is this contradiction and paradox that exemplifies the changes in Moses and Jesus.

The things that we more easily worship – sterling, the dollar, the euro and gold, or status, success, celebrity and legacy – none of these hold or have any power and meaning on the mountain of the presence and in God's light and darkness.

The constancy and faithfulness of God short-circuit all the technology and achievement that we claim for ourselves in our human hubris.

We probably don't want to believe this.

We can bury our heads in the comforting sand of seeing nothing that overwhelms our short and self-determined existence.

We can draw curtains, pull up the duvet, submerge ourselves in work, pursue fame and money, fantasize as to our true importance or find solace in drugs, sexual promiscuity or food.

Some politicians describe our society as 'broken Britain' but the truth is, is that humanity has always been fragmented and dysfunctional.

And ironically with the greater social and personal material of today, we have even more opportunities to exercise a power that diminishes and blinds.

No wonder we yearn for the consolation of romance in which we can lose ourselves albeit only for a little while.

Climbing a mountain may look like a pleasure pursuit but it is also an encounter with the greatness that redefines our perspective and self-understanding.

I love mountains but some people hate them.
But above all, they are, like the ocean, to be feared and respected.

They signify the environment where we are out of our depth and at great risk of extermination.

And that is why the ancients have always regarded them as holy.

So here in church for an hour, we are challenged to put away bouquets and heart-shaped chocolates and to ascend the holy mountain of divine encounter.

It is in this engagement that we expose ourselves to reality.

God lies below and beyond the surface of our lives and the sum of our days.

We have made the world anthropocentric, centred on ourselves as humans and individuals.

Just as we laugh at antique maps that placed Jerusalem or Rome at the centre of the world, and this earth at the centre of the universe and all creation, so we in our own day have replicated the same vision in the values and mores of our society.

The Bible teaches us that our assumptions and certitudes are a delusion and a prison.

Even in 2010 we behave as we always have done by killing, exploitation, neglect, privilege and corruption.

We will never solve our problems through warfare, violence and force of arms. There will be times when we have to defend ourselves or the oppressed against an overwhelming and intransigent evil.

But we will not win any minds or hearts in any part of the world by the gun.

And furthermore we tend to be selective as to who and what we will fight.

Only God can conquer so as to redeem, and only God can give life that is stronger than death.

And it comes to us when we are weak and humble and open to the love that changes the appearance and meaning of everything.

And this brings us to the challenge of Lent which begins this Wednesday.

Will you start again on the journey that Jesus made when he descended from Mount Hermon and set his face towards Jerusalem?

Will you and I do more than give up chocolates or alcohol but travel into the wilderness where we have to live with danger and loss, and trust completely in the promises of Jesus who shares the loneliness and fears of being mortal and human?

This is the real falling in love.
Birds and bees and educated fleas don't do it.
But we can.

Let's do it!

Amen.