

Well today is a busy Sunday - it is the last Sunday before Lent (can you believe!) begins this Wednesday (with Ash Wednesday), Lent being a time to press pause and take stock of our spiritual lives as we build up to Easter, the great celebration of Resurrection from the Dead. It is also 'Transfiguration Sunday', where we read the account we've read today from the Gospel of Luke, in which Jesus takes his three closest disciples to the heights of Mount Tabor and is 'transfigured' before them.

Now I do plan to talk a little bit more about what both Lent and Transfiguration mean, but rather than focus *directly* on either of those, I'm going to take a slightly different tack today, instead focusing on our Psalm reading (Psalm 99).

But first I want to talk about...commercials. I'm not sure how much commercials are really a 'thing' any more with the advent of streaming services (that you can pay extra for to get your content 'ad-free') and ad-blocking computer programs, but I do remember growing up that commercials had a funny way of getting inside your head. This was actually magnified when I first moved to the US, as in the United Kingdom, ads are broken up a little differently; for every one hour of television programming, there would be a single 3-minute ad-break every 15 minutes, giving you just enough time to turn the kettle on again and pour another cup of tea (meaning you'd miss the ads anyway!). In the US however, particularly during sporting events, I have noticed that rather than a 3-minute ad break every 15 minutes, I am instead bombarded with a 1-minute ad every 5 minutes! Little wonder slogans are stuck inside my head...

One particular slogan that I think I will take to my grave is, 'Because you're worth it', a long-running ad campaign by L'Oreal, a maker of various hair and skin care products (which you can clearly see I make no use of whatsoever...maybe I'm not 'worth it'). This Psalm today, Psalm 99, shows us lots of ways that God is 'worth it' - ways that God makes his love for his creation known, and which in turn influence, inspire, and transfigure (see what I did there?) our own love more and more to be like God's perfect love. And in our reading from First Corinthians, we see Saint Paul talking about what love transfigured by God (living in the power of the Holy Spirit) looks like - we see this in action - to help us prepare for Lent by taking stock of where we are at in relation to these lofty ideals of perfect love.

We see why God is 'worth it' in Psalm 99 in three ways:

- His Justice [or judgment] /Equity/Righteousness (he cares)
- Answering of the prayers of his people (he listens)
- Forgiving & Avenging [or punishing as it is translated in our Prayer Book\ (he puts things right)

God cares, God listens, and God puts things right. We are transfigured by this love for us, and our own love is then transfigured by the Holy Spirit more and more to be like God's love.

So let's dive into Psalm 99. A Psalm, to begin with, is simply, a song. The Book of Psalms is the songbook of Israel, and by extension the songbook of the Church; the early Church primarily in its worship sang the Psalms and portions of the Bible, and we continue this practice (at least in part) today with a Psalm reading at each liturgy (which can be said or sung together in the way that we do). A Psalm is a specific *type* of song: A song by God, to God, about God. The Holy Spirit was at work in the hearts of King David and others who

wrote this collection of 150 Psalms. The Psalms are an expression of worship. And the Psalms tell us things about God - who he is, what he has done, and what he promises to do. Just like our own songs are written by someone (a composer or ourselves), they are about something (like Taylor Swift writing songs about all of her ex-boyfriends), and they are written to be sung *to* somebody (even if that 'somebody' is just yourself in the shower).

Psalm 99 is a song of praise, recounting who God is and his mighty acts in the history of Israel. It begins with a statement that God rules over all (and not just Israel!) - 'great in Zion' but also, 'high above all the peoples'. The Psalm is recounting God leading his people out of Egypt and into the Promised Land, overthrowing the military might of the surrounding nations to establish Israel as a light of his love for them - and a statement to all the nations surrounding Israel that he is the one, true God. A God who, per verse 4, '*established equity...has executed judgment and righteousness in Jacob*'. These words *judgment* and *righteousness* for us can have very legalistic overtones - of a judge doling out a punishment to a criminal to 'make them pay' for their crimes - but really the justice being talked about here taking place in Israel is the justice and righteousness established by God's Law - a Law as I've said in previous weeks that is not just arbitrary do's and don'ts, but is ultimately for the good of the community, making sure that everyone is provided for. An example of this is the famous 'eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth' Law, which Jesus seems to turn on its head in his Sermon on the Mount, when he says, 'You have heard this said in the past...but now I say to you do not resist the one who is evil'. Many of the Church Fathers - Christian bishops and leaders from across the history of the Christian faith - actually don't see a disconnect here, as the purpose of 'eye for an eye' was not to validate equal retribution, but to deter any action whatsoever that would *lead to* that being necessary! The idea of it was so that everybody would keep both of their eyes, not that there would eventually be no eyes left!

And this way of living together as God's people with everybody provided for, was (still is!) to be a model for the nations of the world - a group of people that relies and trusts completely in its God, not in its own provisions or earnings or military might or power. What a witness living in such a way would be even today amidst materialism (resting in the things that we have or we've earned) and secularism (separating God from everyday life and putting him 'in a Sunday box').

Our reading from First Corinthians today similarly describes an aspect of love as, 'it does not rejoice in evil, but rejoices with the truth'. As I've said before, when we look at these ideas of sin and law, we have to understand that God isn't being mean - God isn't just setting lofty, impossible standards for us to reach so that he can zap us (like on a driving test, where the examination sheet is all about looking *for* reasons to fail a student). Love does not rejoice in evil...that Law of the Old Testament was in-place to show God's people Israel *where* they were going wrong (when they could not keep it), and for us there remain relevant parts (such as the Ten Commandments) that show us where we go wrong as well...but God also does not want us to *stay* living that way - that way in which we steal or murder or lie etc (both literally and figuratively; there are plenty of ways that we can and do steal from and hurt and deceive each other, among many other things, that are not physical). Saint Paul in his New Testament letter to the Galatians writes that the Law is a *pedagogue* (a teacher, showing us our need for Jesus). God cares.

Now when I preached a couple of Sundays ago about Peter realizing who Jesus is, I made the point that, when we too realize our brokenness, then what is there left to do but as Peter did, and fall down before Jesus begging for his mercy. This Psalm similarly goes on to list Samuel and others who 'called upon' the name of the LORD...and the LORD answered them. Our reading from First Corinthians lists another aspect of love as, '...it does not insist on its own way...' (or it is not 'self-seeking'). God listens. God did not create us to be robots without any capacity for thought or engagement of our own. Relationship requires our free, willing response to God. Prayer - calling out to God and listening to God - is a conversation, it is, as Father John put it last week, making an effort to cultivate a relationship, and in it, we sometimes wrestle with God, discerning - looking *at* our will and looking *for* his will.

God hears our prayers, delighting in relationship with his children by faith, and God is the all-knowing, all-holy one whose will *is* ultimately best; part of the process of prayer is coming *to* these realizations. Saint Augustine famously says that God 'woos' us to him...and for those of you old enough to still understand the word 'woo' (it is a little archaic!) will know that there is no force or coercion in woo-ing, but instead a gentle guidance towards a desired outcome; it's like a peacock dazzling its potential mate with the beauty of its feathers. The male peacock knows what it wants when it spreads its colors out, but if the female wants to turn and walk the other way, then so be it. God cares and God listens. You'll notice that God's response in the Psalm to Samuel, Moses, Aaron and others is, 'the statute that he gave them', that woo-ing guidance. It's not the response of 'love' that we here in a lot of modern pop songs - a sentimental feeling good about each other ('All you need is love') and letting each other do whatever they want to ('hakuna matata') - but God caring and showing us what we need - what is best for us.

God cares.
God listens.

And God *acts on* his caring and his listening (he 'puts things right'). Psalm 99 ends by telling us that God answers the calls of his people, that he forgives and avenges (or punishes). This seems like something of a contradiction: As Father John rightly talked about last week, when we 'forgive', we 'let go' of any right or desire (real or perceived) to get the other person back. Well Saint Augustine again, when preaching on this Psalm himself, makes the point that while God certainly forgives those who repent (who turn back to him and realize the errors of their ways), he also, in a similar way to that Old Testament Law, helps them to not want to continue in that particular sinful behavior; he disciplines or chastises them. And this idea is simply a reflection of what the Writer of the Letter to Hebrews in the New Testament puts when he says:

'What son is there whom his father does not discipline? For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it' (Hebrews 12: 7, 11)

I am a big fan of the TV show Doctor Who - for the uninformed, it's a show about a Time Lord traveling through time and space in a spaceship that looks like a telephone box. It's about as crazy as that sounds. Anyway, in one episode, the Doctor and his companion visit an alien planet which has been singing a lullaby non-stop for millions of years in order to

keep its 'Old God' asleep, in case it wakes up hungry and devours them all. The goal in their case was essentially to make their god 'go away' so that he didn't bother them or hurt them.

While there is bad theology out there that seems to set up an emotionally angry God that Jesus calms down and essentially makes go away so that he's not emotionally angry with us any more, this is not the God of the Bible.

There's an old saying: 'Beauty is pain' (which maybe those L'Oreal because you're worth it adverts don't want you to hear!) - there are difficult steps to go through to reach almost anything quote-unquote 'worth' reaching. A third aspect of love brought up in our reading today from First Corinthians is that love, 'bears all things' (or it 'always perseveres'). When we are challenged in a sinful behavior or inclination or way of living, our initial response is often to batten down the hatches, ignore what we're being told, and come up with reasons why God or the other person telling us this is wrong to help to soothe our conscience. Well God cares enough to still challenge you *despite* being all-knowing, and therefore knowing that you may very well respond in this way. God listens and is present in that internal battle, that turmoil...because God loves you and wants to put you right, to fix you - in fact he already did that by going to the Cross (he made it possible), and now he is simply woo-ing you towards that; woo-ing you towards his perfect love and holiness, which we read about in this Psalm, and which is given to us to grow in as we read about in First Corinthians. In fact this section of First Corinthians (the famous 'love is...' section) could be called a peacock displaying its feathers. Reading that, do we not think wow, I want to love like that!

God doesn't use our suffering to fill up his own sense of self-worth (like the 'Old God' of Doctor Who, unsatisfied until he has eaten or vented his anger) - he already IS fully content in-and-of himself as God...if he were not perfect, he would not be God. God out of his perfect love for his creation reaches out into it, and does what is needed for its best.

God cares.

God listens.

God puts things right.

God loves us by sending his Son to die for the sins of the world, bringing us back into the relationship with him we were created to live in. God then gives those of faith in him his Holy Spirit to change or transfigure us; That's what the word *transfigure* means; not only to change, but to change into something more beautiful or more elevated. It's a change that improves upon the old. Like those Harry Potter Transfiguration spells, where in one of the movies they turn animals into water goblets...although biblical transfiguration actually has a point to it. I mean, who needs to turn animals into water goblets? Even the child actors in that scene are thinking, 'Okay then...'

We are changed (transfigured!) by God's grace in our way of loving from self-centered to God-and-other-centered in the ways we've read about today. We therefore too can more-and-more care in the way that God cares. We can more-and-more listen and woo in the way that God listens and woos. And we can more-and-more be a part of God's plan to put things right - to live in and work to grow his Kingdom, where his justice, equity, and righteousness reigns. We'll sing in our last hymn today, Love Divine All Loves Excelling, that

the Christian life is one of being, 'Changed from glory into glory' - a process of greater and greater transfiguration.

Inspired by God, filled with his Spirit, we can live our lives caring as God does: Not desiring to leave others in their sins, in their not-knowing of God, in ways of living and behaviors that are destructive, or in the materialism and secularism I raised earlier: We can show them a better way: The way of Jesus and his Kingdom. We can love not rejoicing at evil, but in truth.

Inspired by God, filled with his spirit, we can listen to the needs and desires, hopes and fears, of others, inspiring and woo-ing them to him who fulfills all needs: Jesus, all hopes, and quietens all fears: Jesus. We can love not insisting on our own way (not being 'self-seeking'), but pointing to God's way.

Inspired by God, filled with his spirit, we can walk with people on their journeys of faith toward God, ups-and-downs and everything in-between. We can love bearing all things (always persevering).

God is 'worth it'.

God's Kingdom is 'worth it'.

All people, made in God's image, are 'worth it'.

This Lent, I want to recommend a devotional practice to you: take this Psalm and take this famous passage from First Corinthians 13, and use it to 'take stock' of where you are at with God. Maybe read parts of it each day, once a week, or all of it every day if you're feeling up to it! Ask God to be at work in your heart (even when it's difficult! Be open to that process) to continue to transform and transfigure you to be more and more like Jesus.

Be a carer. Be a listener. Be a healer. Just like God.

Amen.