



## **Br Thomas for Sunday before Lent (2021)**

What is the connection between our reflection on certitude, at *lectio* last Wednesday, and online banking ? The answer – as I’m sure you’ve already guessed – is the Transfiguration... Let me explain.

The other day at Lectio one of our Sisters was musing on the opening phrase of I John 2: 15,

“Do not set your hearts on the world or the things in the world”

As I recall, she spoke about the directness of that “do not” and reflected, first, on our sense of things which definitely should not be done, and then the difficulty that can arise when we reach a new understanding or find ourselves in a new context – or are considering someone else’s choice, someone whose circumstances we don’t fully know – and that certainty is lost.

To take an obvious example, twelve months ago if someone emailed me expressing a sense of calling to monastic life I would have asked about their faith history and current pattern of discipleship then invited them to book in, to visit, to meet us and – if that hadn’t put them off – to start a conversation about becoming an Alongsider. Today I can begin with the same questions, but I know I mustn’t invite them to book in. I have to look for other ways of nurturing and testing their interest.

So the recurrent question, in all sorts of settings, is how to learn the will of God. All human beings need some certainty: we can’t cope if everything is variable; we yearn for a framework – with more or less detail according to our temperaments – that will give us some fixed points and the sense of security that goes with that. What, then, are the fixed points from God?

In the Hebrew bible, some of these are clear. God spoke to Moses “face to face, as one talks to a friend” [Exod. 33:11]. The Law was written on Mt Sinai and Moses could say, on the Lord’s behalf:

“Hear, O Israel...”

In later centuries the prophets spoke God’s word, stating:

“Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel” or “Listen to the word of the Lord”. But there was always a niggle, an anxiety, because prophets sometimes disagreed. Famously, as described in

I Kings 22, when King Ahab of Israel and King Jehoshaphat of Judah were preparing to attack the Arameans, they enquired of the Lord: the prophet Zedekiah told them they would win, but the prophet Micaiah told them they would lose.

This brings me to my recent issue with the bank – and, I expect, with many other financial or official institutions. How do they know that the person asking them to pay a bill or change an address is to be believed? In times past one went to their premises with one’s bank card or passport, and that item – together with personal recognition – was enough to authenticate the request. Nowadays, of course, there are fewer offices, fewer employees, and they’ve realised that it’s easy to fool a machine. You

might think that the logical response would be to recruit more employees again, but no: the computer is king so everyone has to set up a username and password. But then they realise that usernames and passwords can be hacked or stolen – like bank cards or passports, of course – so they add, in this case, a ‘memorable word’. (They mean, a second password.) Everyone must set up a memorable word to authenticate their instruction. But now – does this sound familiar – they also want customers to use one of those little electronic gizmos, a card reader, to confirm the memorable word. Which might be tolerable except, of course, they can’t trust that the card reader hasn’t been stolen, so one must have a PIN for the card reader. And – this only gets better – they will only issue a PIN if one rings up to speak to an actual employee to answer questions that prove one’s identity. Finally – and this is the absolute cream – the actual employee proved my identity by asking for my address... and my memorable word! Ridiculous!

So how, then, in an anxious and distrustful world, does one authenticate the instruction?

For Christians, one answer is given in the Letter to the Hebrews – after all, those early Jewish believers knew their bibles and the problem of unreliable prophets:

“God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son” [Heb. 1: 1,2].

The Son, it is presumed, has the authority to speak for the Father, but who will authenticate the Son? The different Gospel accounts all address this. For example, St Luke tells us that after Jesus has raised the widow of Nain’s son from the dead, the people say:

“a great prophet has risen among us!” [Luke 7: 16]

Whereas St John, after the miracle of water turned into wine, states:

“Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.” [John 1: 11].

Either way, Jesus is recognised as authorised to speak for God, even if Luke reckons the witnesses are unsure of Jesus’ sonship, and John can only assure us that some of the witnesses believed.

In the Gospel according to St Mark there are several kinds of authentication. Witnesses to miracles are frequently cited as glorifying God for His work in Jesus, and demons are frequently quoted as recognising Jesus as the Son of God, yet the disciples themselves, throughout Mark’s account, find it hard to accept this authentication: they doubt, they ask, they’re confused and uncertain.

But Mark also presents authentication by God Himself – the voice from heaven. He describes this twice: at the Baptism, and in today’s account of the Transfiguration. There is a clear distinction between these two occasions. At the Baptism, which appears to be a public event, the evangelist describes only Jesus seeing the Spirit descend like a dove, and the voice from heaven speaks personally:

“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” [Mark 1: 11].

By contrast, in today’s gospel passage, we read of a private affair – three chosen disciples, up a mountain. Authentication has three parts – the bank would be proud. First, Jesus is transfigured and radiates light – like a miracle. Secondly, witnesses appear from the dead – like the spirits. Thirdly there is – once more – the voice from heaven, but this time addressed to Peter, James and John:

“This is my Son, the Beloved: listen to him!” [Mark 9: 7]

You would think that’s pretty clear. But then the vision is gone. They look round: nothing. And Jesus tells them not to talk about it. He turns to the next challenge ahead and that frightens them because he speaks of death. Mark reports:

“But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.” [Mark 9: 32]

How then were they to learn the will of God?

Either there was the Mosaic Law, with a religious hierarchy to interpret it, but no one could keep it exactly, and some of those who were most exact seemed a long way from its essence. Or there was the prophetic word, but how could one assess which prophets were true to God? And now there was Jesus, fully authenticated, who said a bunch of things that expressed the essence but still left them – we are told - groping uncertainly for the truth.

Then there was Jesus’ Passion and Resurrection – both teaching and authentication – but the apostles then, and the Church ever since, have still been arguing, sometimes fighting and murdering, over what it all means and what teaches us the will of God.

So where do we find any certainty, any fixed points? In one sense we don’t – we live here by faith, not by sight. But beyond that I would suggest that our fundamental fixed points are two: our first fixed point is Jesus, crucified and raised from the dead; our second fixed point is perseverance in humility and hard work.

We don’t know. We aren’t sure. But we know enough and we are sure of enough. We have the Law, the Prophets and the Gospel. We have the Spirit of God, not speaking from heaven but blowing as a breeze - or sometimes a gust - through our world and our hearts. We are called, I believe, to commit ourselves to searching, sifting and struggling with all that God has given us, never claiming to know it all, never claiming to be fully righteous, but trusting that as we reach for God and His will, so He will graciously reach toward us. That is my hope as we begin this season of Lent.

Amen.