

Lent 3 Year C 2019

During the first few months of the Second World War the artist Stanley Spencer began a series of forty paintings entitled “Christ in the Wilderness”. The idea was to create a painting for each day of Lent in which he reflected on Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness. In the event Spencer only completed eight paintings and this morning I have elected to think about one of those pictures entitled “Consider the Lilies”.



The first thing which we can hardly fail to notice in this picture is the figure of Jesus – there is nothing ascetic about this Jesus; he doesn't look as if he has done much fasting recently. This huge, imposing figure is more reminiscent of the vast rocks and boulders that littered the landscape of the Judean desert. And that, of course, is not accidental. In today's epistle St. Paul describes Jesus as "the rock". It was a title that was used of God in the OT where the Psalmist, trying to convey the faithfulness and dependability of God, sang these words: "The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer" (Psalm 18). There is an ancient tradition in the church of learning such phrases by heart so that the Holy Spirit can remind us of them, draw them from the storehouse of our memory, when our lives are shaken and we particularly need the rock of God's steadfast love. "The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer."

But, this image of Jesus as the rock on whom we can depend is developed still further by St. Paul. He links the dependable presence of Jesus to an OT account when the people of God were hungry and thirsty in the wilderness and Moses stuck a rock and water poured forth. Christ, he says, is that rock from which comes living water to revive and renew. We hear echoes of this in today's OT reading where Isaiah reminds his hearers that the Lord not only revives his people with food and drink but waters the wilderness so that it buds and flowers, producing cypress and myrtle rather than thorns and thistles. And this is exactly what Spencer has depicted in this painting. Instead of seeing Jesus in a dry, barren desert we

see him gazing at the flowers that have sprung up after the rains have come.

The title of the painting “Consider the Lilies” comes from a passage in Matthew’s gospel which begins with these words: “Do not worry about your life”. And worry or anxiety about life can be a very real temptation, causing us to doubt the providential care of God and Spencer imagines this as one of the temptations of Jesus faced during his forty days in the desert. But, instead of worrying Jesus gazes here with rapt attention at the beauty of the flowers which have flourished in a barren place. It is as if he is pondering the way these lovely flowers have come into existence solely through the life-giving provision of God. Interestingly Spencer glosses the text from Matthew by having Jesus gaze, not at glorious lilies such as we will see in this Cathedral at Easter, but at daisies – an ordinary, everyday sort of flower. Perhaps Spencer is saying to us that one way to avoid worrying and fretting about life and its problems is to live with a contemplative regard for the everyday, ordinary world around us which is held and sustained by the love of God.

Well, we might think Spencer is being a little unrealistic here. Can living with an awareness of God in the everyday really stop anxiety, especially when you consider the huge problems some people face in their lives? But, let’s recall that he painted this picture during the Second World War when he was only too aware of the way people experienced evil and

tragedy in their lives. It's something referenced in today's gospel where Jesus tells his hearers that tragic events are emphatically not sent as a punishment from God. Rather one of the characteristics of evil is that it is random and indiscriminate in the way it touches human lives. And we know that from a week ago when devout people were shot as they prayed in a mosque and at an Islamic centre in Christchurch. Bad things can happen to good people.

What matters, says Jesus, is how we react to the evil and the tragedies that come upon us. And the essential response he says is to repent – that is we turn towards God. I began with the scriptural image of Jesus as the Rock and this where I want to end. There was once a hymn writer with the unlikely name of Augustus Toplady who wrote the hymn “Rock of Ages”. It is said, though it does seem to be more fable than fact, that he wrote this hymn whilst sheltering from a violent storm. The fable goes that he was walking in the Mendip Hills when he was engulfed in a massive cloudburst. He found refuge and shelter in a cleft of a huge rock at Burrington Combe and as a result wrote the hymn proclaiming Jesus as our rock, our fortress and our deliverer.

Whatever the facts, behind this story lies an important spiritual truth. When we are overwhelmed by random events and sufferings in this life we are to turn to the Lord and seek his grace. And it was that truth that sustained Stanley Spencer as war began and he painted this marvellous

picture of Christ in the Wilderness. So please take your Order of Service home this week and ponder this painting. Reflect on Christ the Rock who overcomes worry and anxiety by regarding the everyday wonders around him and realising that they are there for us because of the providential, dependable love of God.

(I am very grateful to Bishop Stephen Cottrell for his insights on “Consider the Lilies”.)

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