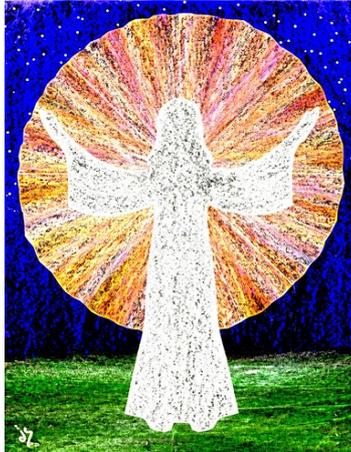


**The Sunday before Lent,
Sunday, 14th February 2021**



Dear Friends,

‘This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to Him!’ (Mark 9: 7)

BBC Newsreader, Neil Sleat, has taken early retirement from radio to pursue other interests. He will be particularly remembered for his faultless (and remarkably nonchalant) pronunciation of an Hawaiian woman’s thirty-five letter married surname during a news bulletin – not just once but twice!

Janice Keihanaikukauakahihuliheekahaunaele hit the headlines in 2013, when her Polynesian married name would not fit onto County identity cards. She won her complaint against officials who suggested she reverted to her maiden name of *Worth*, though it will doubtless be Neil Sleat’s gifted enunciation which will stay in the minds of many. Mrs Keihanaikukauakahihuliheekahaunaele was insistent about keeping her identity intact, as it was one of the ways by which she could keep the memory of her late husband alive. In an interview some years later, Neil Sleat remarked how important he felt was to honour the lives of the people about whom he was broadcasting, through his perfect phonation and fluency of voice.



‘Transfiguration’ by Alexandr Ivanov

Would that more people in the public domain were as respectful! During Lockdown, I am not sure whether the instances of derogatory remarks about Christians and their faith in the public media has increased or if I have been available more to experience them? Either way, I am finding myself provoked! I have never experienced difficulty with people who do not believe in the existence of God. Quite the opposite in fact - I genuinely respect their point of view. Entomologist and broadcaster, George McGavin recently very gently refused the offer of a bible to accompany him on his Desert Island, for example. His personal view was held in respectful balance with those for whom the bible is a fundamental truth.

What I do find problematic is the disparaging attitude of some in our modern times towards the faith of others, somehow being fair game to be ridiculed out of hand. In the past week alone, comedians on a radio panel show, *'The Unbelievable Truth'* found a great deal to ridicule when discussing the birth of Christ, and in their self-styled 'witty, irreverent look at the world through scientist's eyes,' presenters of *'The Infinite Monkey Cage,'* physicist, Brian Cox, and comedian, Robin Ince, regularly laugh outright with their guests at people of faith – particularly in response to any reference to the understanding of divine creation.



'The Creation' by James Tissot

Such troubling commentaries occasionally even cause doubts to flurry around my own head, just like the snow trying to settle around our villages yet not quite managing to. I wonder how on earth these drip-fed disparagements must affect those whose faith is shaky, let alone those who are susceptible to the precarious barbs of wounding sarcasm. God's words of strength to the disciples on Mount Tabor form my prayer on their behalf: *'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to Him!'* But then another divine response comes through, so swift and unexpected ... and feels such a deeply powerful answer to prayer, that I offer it up as much for you as for me as we confront the Cross and the reality of Christ in our lives.

On Monday morning, as I was enjoying a cup of tea snuggled up back in bed against the cold, and wondering what to do with my day off, the 'phone rang and I found myself rapidly scrambling into priestly garb and heading up to Flowerdown Nursing Home to visit a dying resident. Unable to go inside the building, I stood in the garden outside the lady's bedroom and prayed over her through her French windows.



'The Transfiguration of Christ' by Giovanni Bellini

In the stillness, I was mindful of her peaceful breathing and staff coming in and out to tend to her. Yet my vision of her was distorted by my own reflection, which seemed to cause a bright light to form all around the lady and her bed. No matter how I tried, because of the angle of the morning sun and the freezing temperatures affecting my breath, I could not avoid praying for her through the vision of my own image. And that is when the image of Christ's transfiguring presence working in and through our lives hit me!

Our faithful prayers, even when directed through French windows to a sleeping figure, are powerful because we are all connected in that same loving action through which God speaks: *'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to Him!'* Nothing I could do in that moment could separate me and the woman and the nursing staff, and her anxious family who could not be physically with her, nor all creation, from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus. This is our faith! This is our truth! And in the midst of deep and sacred overarching prayer, so I saw my hands lifting up those who know no better than to mock our Lord and Saviour, into the same loving arms of the one who will go to Calvary to save us all.



'The Transfiguration of Jesus' by Theophanes the Greek

The Church of England has now finalised and released its Lent course for 2021. Called **#LiveLent**, its materials are based on the Archbishop of Canterbury's Lent book for 2021, *'Living His Story'* by Hannah Steele which is available from SPCK. There is a course booklet (also available from Church House Publishing at £1.99), which includes a short Bible passage, a reflection and a prayer for each day of Lent. The reflections are also available via the free App; emails; audio and through the Church of England's social media accounts. I hope you will make time to join us!

We will be running the course via Zoom gatherings on Thursday evenings at 7.00pm. Each of the seven weekly sessions offers a reflection on a given bible reading, a prayer and an action on what is described as 'a unifying theme' to be undertaken during the week. The course encourages all Christians to think about their calling, how to share their faith and reflect on the difference Christ makes in our lives.

To join the weekly Zoom meetings, please register your email address with the Benefice Office to receive the Zoom link.

- Thursday 18th February – The Greatest Story of All Time
- Thursday 25th February – Catching up with God
- Thursday 4th March – Jesus was in the transformation business
- Thursday 11th March – Communicating like Jesus did
- Thursday 18th March – Passing on the story of Jesus
- Thursday 25th March – Finding echoes of the story of Jesus in our world today
- Thursday - 1st April – Stories of finding Jesus

Yours, in the loving action of Christ,

Jax

Rector, The Downs Benefice

Schedule of Services

After much prayer, and in response to the ongoing threat to public health of the new and virulent strain of COVID-19, our Benefice of five parishes has decided to suspend in-Church services until further notice in an attempt to model the Government's request of us all to stay at home and beat the spread of Coronavirus. Instead, our Benefice website has many links to a wide range of digital resources from across the Church of England and within our Diocese, including our own recorded services. You will find all these resources at: <http://downsbenefice.org/>

You will find a recorded **Service of Holy Communion for Ash Wednesday, 17th February 2021** which will be ready to view on our website after the weekend.

As our nation passes the tragic milestone of 100,000 Coronavirus deaths, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York are inviting our country to **join together in private prayer at 6pm each evening**, in response to the suffering and sadness the pandemic has brought our world. You will find their letter on our website. Do join in this profound action of love for all affected by this disease.



Collect Prayer for the Sunday before Lent

Almighty God,

You have created the heavens and the earth and made us in Your own image:
teach us to discern your hand in all your works and your likeness in all your children;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who with you and the Holy Spirit reigns supreme over all things,
now and for ever.
Amen.



Mark 9:2-9 -The Transfiguration

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus.

Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!' Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus.

As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.