

Lenten Sermon: Rt Rev Dr Eleanor Sanderson, 6th week of Lent 2019

- 00:00 As we come into this last week of Lent, the ending of our Lenten study where we've been journeying as a community of grace, our focus falls on what it means for us to live together with that posture of grace. And we're given two images from Scripture today, we're given the image of salt and the image of light. And the one I want us to focus on is the image of light.
- 00:24 Light is a way that the people of God throughout time and space have used to recognize God's presence with us, they called Jesus the light of the world. The people of Israel, as they were formed as the people of God, traveled with the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night, this image of light. And Moses, when he had those times of deep intimacy with God, talked about how his face shone with the glory of God.
- 00:55 So much so that his community asked him to veil his face because that presence of the glory that was upon him was so bright for them. So when we hear the scripture today about being light to the world, and the encouragement to keep shining as a light, I want to dwell with you on a particular expression of that light that's here at the moment in the Chapel of the Transfiguration at the University up in Wellington.
- 01:26 I want to tell you the story of how this painting was painted and then I want to reflect on that together as how we can live as communities of grace. So the transfiguration story in different parts of our communion has a poignancy at different markers in the Lenten journey, so as a church you may have chosen to celebrate the Feast of Transfiguration during the Lenten journey, before it began, or towards its end.
- 01:57 And it's this moment in Jesus' life where, before He sets His face to His passion, there is this moment of profound communion with God, where Jesus goes up the mountain taking His closest people with Him. And on that mountain, that place of going to be with God, He is transfigured before them. He is shining with the light, the glory of God.
- 02:25 We're told that in that story two figures come and have conversations with Him: Moses and Elijah, talking with him about the journey that He is about to accomplish through the cross. And so I wanted to bring you here, in our last Lenten video before you journey into the week, the Holy Week and the Passion of Christ, and tell you this painting's story in particular. It's a painting that Michael Smither, famous New Zealand artist, painted when he was young.
- 02:59 It was commissioned by the first Anglican Chaplaincy community here at Ramsey House under the chaplain Rev Peter Stewart. And the Transfiguration was chosen by him because of the resonance that it had in the sense of light in the university setting, as the light of Christ. And also because of the link of the Transfiguration story in the work of Archbishop Michael Ramsey, the Archbishop of Canterbury at the time. And so this task was given to the young Michael Smither to paint and as he painted the Transfiguration, he painted it in a way that expressed fear, starkness and the glory of God in quite a confronting way. A way that he perceived fitted with the university context.

- 03:28 The first painting he painted wasn't actually this painting. It was exactly the same painting, but he painted it on glass. And as the paint dried the following day the painting shattered because the glass shattered with the dry paint.
- 03:59 And Michael Smither had the strength and the fortitude to remain; and to carry on and to repaint the painting. And so he painted again, and the second time he painted the painting, not on glass, but on perspex. And that is this painting, the one that has been gifted and associated with this place ever since. There's two things about that that I want to expand on for us.
- 04:30 The first is the distinction between the glass and the perspex. This is a kind of metaphorical jump, as you were, but when we talk about communities of grace one of the languages that we use sometimes is our 'stretchy family of God' – that the gift of being a community stretches us, it stretches our comfort zones, it stretches us. Love your neighbour as yourself.
- 04:57 It's a big call that we have, to be the people of God. And it's very easy for us to increasingly find ways to live that make us more comfortable, that lessen the amount of times we have to confront our rough edges, confront aspects of our lives that kind of go with the flow of society. And my hope and prayer is that as you've journeyed through Lent, both in your Lenten study groups, or as you've journeyed through Lent in your disciplines of fasting and prayer, those experiences have brought you closer to some of those edgier parts of yourselves. The part of yourself that is struggling, because whatever it is you fasted from you're really looking forward to that coffee again, or you're
- 05:44 really looking forward to something else. Those things that just bring us closer to our humanity. And when we live in community intentionally with other people, which is the call of the church in its rich variety, what we experience is our own vulnerability with each other. And so I just offer this as an image. The difference between the glass that shattered in its fragility, and the perspex
- 06:11 that had the stretchiness to maintain this painting. The second thing about this painting is it has quite a controversial history. Some people find it too confronting, a little bit like the story of Moses being asked to veil his face, and in a former era this painting was given a very Anglican solution. It was put in a light box. So if the light was on you could see it because of the way that it's painted with the reflection.
- 06:42 But if the light was off you didn't have to see the painting. So you could choose whether or not you wanted to experience it. It was seen as too confronting a painting to be in a university setting, which often is a confronting place. Which actually was part of the origins of why it was painted in that way. And that makes me think of our Gospel, the call to be light and salt and not to lose our saltiness, not to hide the light.
- 07:12 And as we as a community of God remember Jesus' passion, it's a story that would be really nice to close the door on, really nice to say "that never really happened," nice to say that that degree of torture, that degree of treatment, didn't happen in this world. But the truth is that it did. The truth is that there is enormous darkness in this world in all sorts of places.
- 07:40 The truth is that God is present in those darkest of places. And the challenge of not letting the light be hidden is that we don't agree with the darkness. The light within ourselves we let maintain itself, and the darkness that surrounds us we

don't let that subsume it. We can do that in lots of different ways. But grace is the path with which we are able to keep the light within us.

- 08:11 And so I want to invite you to think as you journey with Jesus to the cross and through the cross. I want you to notice the ways that Jesus does not agree with the darkness that swims around Him. The way He notices the darkness, the way He disagrees with it. The way that Jesus doesn't acquiesce to the dark things of this world but maintains Himself as the light of the world.
- 08:39 And I also want you to notice the grace of God that surrounds Jesus. There's one particular service in our Anglican tradition that you may have been part of, it's called the service of shadows. There's a time when the different lights, the different candles are extinguished as we remember the times of darkness that came around Jesus. But I want to invite you, instead of focusing on those shadows
- 09:09 this year, the shadow of desertion, the shadow of betrayal, I want you to notice the grace of God. And the light. The light of solidarity, the light that the women were at the cross with Jesus. The light that Jesus had sacred words that He could use to speak out His sense of desertion from God.
- 09:36 "My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?" – that He was given sacred words that He was able to say. There's a grace. And there's a light there in that. And the light of the way that love surrounded Jesus to the end. People of love were always with Jesus in different ways through that story and Jesus Himself embodied the endless grace.
- 10:03 For Jesus to speak forgiveness, to speak a passageway of peace, of love, and of grace in the darkest of times. The light that we have from God is the light that does not agree with the darkness. And every time we focus on the gift of God, every time we reaffirm the truth of God, we ourselves don't acquiesce to the darkness that is around us. Let me pray.
- 10:39 Living God. May we take Your hand as we journey towards this final part of Lent, and through the Passion of our Lord. May You give us eyes to see the way that Jesus shone. And may You illuminate our hearts and our minds so that those parts within ourselves that can so easily be disguised by the darkness that surrounds us
- 11:12 find greatest strength of identity and belonging in You, that we would shine as lights in the world. We ask this for Jesus' sake, our Saviour and our friend. Amen.