

The Sunday before Lent

In *Pretend it's a City*, Martin Scorsese's short Netflix series about NYC Critic and Curmudgeon Fran Leibowitz, Fran opines that musicians, and especially popular music, are unique in the arts in gathering associative hinterlands around our lives which transcend the quality of particular pieces (though she does allow that cooks give equal joy). Music, especially from our youth, weaves into our lives an emotional and even spiritual coding that reprising a song or piece of music can immediately bring to life at any time. I'd agree: music encodes in us something which can make us happy or sad, can change us at that moment. And I think today's Gospel event was in this sense like a piece of music for the three apostles who were with Jesus on the mountain.

When I'd not long arrived in my last parish, I had to preach on today's Gospel at a quarterly youth-led version of the parish Mass devised by my predecessor. This liturgy wasn't among what Julie Andrews might refer to as My Favourite Things, so it didn't survive very long in my incumbency. On this occasion for some, doubtless excellent but now forgotten, reason, it involved playing an old pop song, *Those were the days*, sung, I read in Wikipedia, by Welsh singer Mary Hopkin. You probably know it – 'those were the days, my friend, we thought they'd never end.' Etc. Repeat until comatose.

Hearing that song vividly recreates associations for me. I am old enough to remember the Australian summer when it was number one. We didn't listen to the radio much at home, but my grandfather, who had retired at 60 and went to the beach almost every day afterwards, always had the radio playing in his car. I was staying with my grandparents that summer, and then often-played song brings back to me not just the sixties, but the feel and the smell of the blinding and blazing Australian sun on a vinyl car seat, mixed with the salt of the sea, zinc cream on the face and the gritty feeling of sand on the floor of the car. It's a strange combination of nostalgia and discomfort!

I suspect Jesus' friends had equally vivid and many-dimensional sensory recollections of what happened on the holy mountain. St Peter recalls in his 2nd letter,
For he received honour and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." ¹⁸ We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain. 2 Peter 1.17-18.

This must surely have been one of the most memorable events in their time with Jesus before his Cross and Resurrection, if also somewhat uncomfortable and even disturbing. We know that it was remembered and recorded long before the stories of Christmas and Epiphany and the baptism of Jesus, but like those events it was recalled as a moment at which Jesus was revealed as *who he really was*. As Peter says, this was one of the memories which stayed with those who were there vividly

enough to keep them walking in the way and sharing the good news with others for years and decades after Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

Most of all, this was a moment which helped them, with hindsight, to understand the resurrection, because it was a preview of the resurrection and ascension, of everything that lay beyond the cross for Jesus, a preview which was contextualized by Jewish scripture: the presence of Moses and Elijah here represents the law and the prophets, Jewish shorthand for all of scripture. But more important than the presence of these two sainted Ancestors is when they disappear.

Today's gospel should really finish a verse earlier than it did. The thing we need to be left with today is the end of verse 8: 'only Jesus'. Once Jesus is confirmed as God's Son by this appearance, Moses and Elijah are no longer seen. He is as much greater than Moses and Elijah as the Spirit which gives life is superior to the written code which kills. Moses and Elijah give way to him, to 'Jesus only', two words which became the rallying cry or sermon motto of Fr Ignatius of Llantony, the Anglo-Catholic Billy Graham of the 19th century (whose preaching bible we have in our archives). Fr Ignatius had 'Jesus only' painted on banners and repeated the words often in his highly successful preaching missions, which could draw crowds of 10,000 in London. *Those* were the days.

Listening to that song again with added Wiki-knowledge I understand in a way that I could not as an 8 year old Sydney beachgoer that it is obviously, in origin, a Russian folk song, which accounts for the jangly accompaniment and the rustic tavern-setting; I learn also that the singer, Mary Hopkin, was born into a Welsh-speaking family in Pontardawe, where her father worked as a housing officer and where she first recorded folk songs in Welsh for the local label, Cambrian (she's still going, by the way). Nothing could be further from those lazy summer associations that the song conjures for me than her early South Wales life; I doubt whether, aged 8, I knew where Wales was. Yet thirty years later I was serving a second curacy in South Wales, not fifty miles from Pontardawe. Things seen and heard increase in significance as we understand their hinterland, subjective and objective, and as we acquire our own. Our calling is to see God's DNA in that hinterland.

Today's second reading refocuses this Gospel for us:

For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness', who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

2 Corinthians 4.⁶

Those were the days, as Peter might have added. What we see and how we remember it accumulates into who we are, into our consciousness, Christian or not. We all have high points, in our spiritual lives as elsewhere, that we try to hang on to, the things that changed us and made us who we are, or would like to be. But we note today that Jesus tells them *not* to hang on, but to move on. They are not to share the experience,

nor are they to build tents for him and Moses and Elijah, Peter's attempt to hold the encounter as a static fixed point.

The most important thing about this, and all our experiences, is to recall the focus: that 'only Jesus', God's Son, is the core of our faith. Everything else is detail.