



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 2nd March 2025

Readings: *Exodus 34:29-35; 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2; Luke 9:28-36*

The Sunday before Lent begins; Transfiguration Sunday

Preface: In the all-ages moment earlier in the service, Nigel Uden had responded to the reading from Exodus 34:29-35, in which Moses 'came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand'. Nigel spoke of Mrs Lewis and Mrs Gibson, two late nineteenth/early twentieth century members of Downing Place Church, when it was St Columba's Presbyterian Church, who had been to the monastery at Mount Sinai and found what remains one of the earliest written versions of the Gospels. It was written on a palimpsest.

A palimpsest is an ancient form of recycling. The word, palimpsest, comes from the Greek words meaning 'again', and 'rubbed smooth'. So, a palimpsest refers to a text that had been painstakingly written onto papyrus or vellum most commonly but, when, later, a *different* text needed to be written, the expense and scarcity of the papyrus and vellum led to the reuse of those old sheets. Erasing the original script led to one passage being overlaid onto another. Hence palimpsest – used *again* having been *rubbed smooth*. Imagine the laborious endeavour if one wanted to set down some exciting new text, but could only do so on what a charity shop might call 'pre-loved' vellum.

Today, scientists and textual scholars combine their skills to use spectral imaging and image processing to study that undertext. Earlier we saw an image from over a hundred years ago, with showed Mrs Lewis working on a palimpsest with reagent. What the sisters of Sinai and their companions discovered was one of the earliest texts of the Gospels, that had been overwritten with a seventh century biography of female saints and martyrs. That biography of those women was fascinating enough, yet the version of the Gospels beneath it which their later colleagues found also remains an invaluable source for Biblical scholarship.

With a palimpsest, what is underneath was sufficiently removed for something new to overlay it, but very often that original did not always go away entirely. Hence the capacity to be able to rediscover with care the original writing. How grateful the theological world has been that methods were found to rediscover the original, too.

Life is a bit of a palimpsest. There's stuff overlaid onto what went before. The newer shields the older, but the older continues to influence and shape the newer.

So, we could look at our own lives. They are a palimpsest. We live today, fully focussed on what needs to be done in the moment. But few of us do so without an undertext of learning and insights, of experiences and relationships, of successes we savour and of failures, mistakes we regret. Alert to today's story of our lives, how grateful we are for yesterday's narrative underneath it, which so significantly defines who we are now, maybe when times are bad saving us from thinking they are *always* bad, and when they are good saving us from forgetting the lessons we've learned.

I was grateful to be at a seminar this week about the contribution music therapy can make to us if we are living with dementia. The undertext in the palimpsest of our lives shows us the music that stirred us yesterday, and as we inhabit the brave new world of changing cognitive capacity, that musical past can be a real blessing today. So, the speakers told us of someone who demonstrably reemerged from the shell of dementia if they heard *Deep Purple*, the rock band of fifty years earlier when they were in their twenties. And when I visited a care home myself on Friday, it was so moving to see the reanimated residents as an Elvis impersonator swung his hips until the residents were truly rocking in their wheelchairs. Thanks be for the palimpsest of our lives.

Our spiritual life can be something of a palimpsest, too. We heard this week of the new Bishop of Buckingham, who grew up as an atheist. That earlier layer of the bishop's life hasn't been removed. It's still part of who he is. And what an invaluable insight that experience of atheism gives to the bishop as he points to Jesus Christ in an era increasingly confident that atheism should be one of today's hallmarks. Bishop Dave's (what other name could he have?) spiritual trek has taken him along the byways of not believing, or trusting. Blessed by his past lived reality, he can be a travel guide for people

who are on that very road now. He can show them that trusting in Jesus can be for them a new life. Thanks be for the palimpsest of Bishop Dave's life.

So, what about the earlier layers of your spiritual life and mine? Have we been through periods when our hearts were hardened against God? Was there a veil over our eyes, that prevented us seeing God, or distorted our vision? It'd be no surprise to me if there was, because there has been for me. Maybe that's how you are feeling today. Paul suggests that the journey into Christ takes us from one degree of glory to another – we are, he seems to be implying, forever growing in the knowledge of God. That's what James and John and Andrew found on the mountain of transfiguration. Sleep deprived though they were, they were arrested by a vision as never before of what Jesus was about. Even for them the revelation was partial, incomplete, and fleeting, too. But on-going, especially as they came gradually towards Calvary, and then the empty tomb. They discovered what the voice meant: 'this is my son, my chosen; listen to him.'

If we're honest, some spectral imaging of our spiritual journey would probably show a bit of zig zag as well: interest here, conviction there; oh, and there's a phase of scepticism and disillusion; and here we are, back on track. Such is the Christian's life. There is not just one direction of travel; not just one layer. But God knows each layer of our spiritual palimpsest. Nor is the God we see in Jesus naive enough to misunderstand the zigzag of our discipleship. Remember, 'while he was still far off, his father saw him, and was filled with compassion.'¹ Just as there is something of the prodigal child in each of us, so there remains everything of the prodigal parent in God, lavish in their love, consistent in their covenant that says, 'I will be your God, and you will be my child.'² Thanks be for the palimpsest of our spiritual lives.

In my experience, Church life is something of a palimpsest, too. There are layers of goodness and even of glory, overlaid with layers of challenge and change. How good that we have the reagent of memory to recall the delightful alongside the difficult. For Downing Place Church, we may feel that this is a season when the vellum will record a sequence of questions and concerns about the future, given so much imminent change, and that, in a world beset by so much challenge. It's why as a community of faith, Sunday by Sunday we turn to the scriptures for help – turn to that God whom today's Psalm defines as reigning over all the earth with justice and forgiveness. And it's why we come to this table, where we are met by a God who is found in the broken bread and poured out wine. These are signs and seals not of the One who only embraces the perfect and the faultless, the confident and the content, but of the one who meets the poor and lonely, the fallen, flawed and failing, the wondering and the wandering, and says 'Come to me ..., come to me ..., come to me.'

I am struck, you see, that when the sisters saw the Sinaitic Palimpsest the top layer was the story of saints and martyrs. Seven centuries of tricky times are narrated, giving us a reminder that the challenged life of the community of faith, of the body of Christ, 'twas ever thus. In the history of the church there have always been seasons of uncertainty, of shadows, of zig zagging fortune and fruitfulness. But - it does not seem entirely fanciful to picture Mrs Lewis and Mrs Gibson sitting somewhere you are, in this very sanctuary, in later life and recalling how beneath that *Vita* – that story of the church's life - there was the Gospel, the stop-you-in-your-footsteps reminder of the *One God, revealed in Jesus, and active here and now in the Holy Spirit*.³

Thanks be to God for the Sinaitic Palimpsest, and for the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which is the text onto which we scrawl the faltering but faithful chapters of our own discipleship, and of our life together in Christ.

'Underneath, underneath are the everlasting arms.'⁴ Thanks be to God.

N. P. Uden

2nd March 2025

¹ The Prodigal Son Luke 15.20

² cf Genesis 17.7; II Corinthians 6.18

³ David Fergusson, preaching at the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity on 19th January 2025, Wesley Methodist Church, Cambridge

⁴ Deuteronomy 33.27