

'GESIMA' Sermon for 14th February 2021 (Quinquagesima) – Fr. Mike

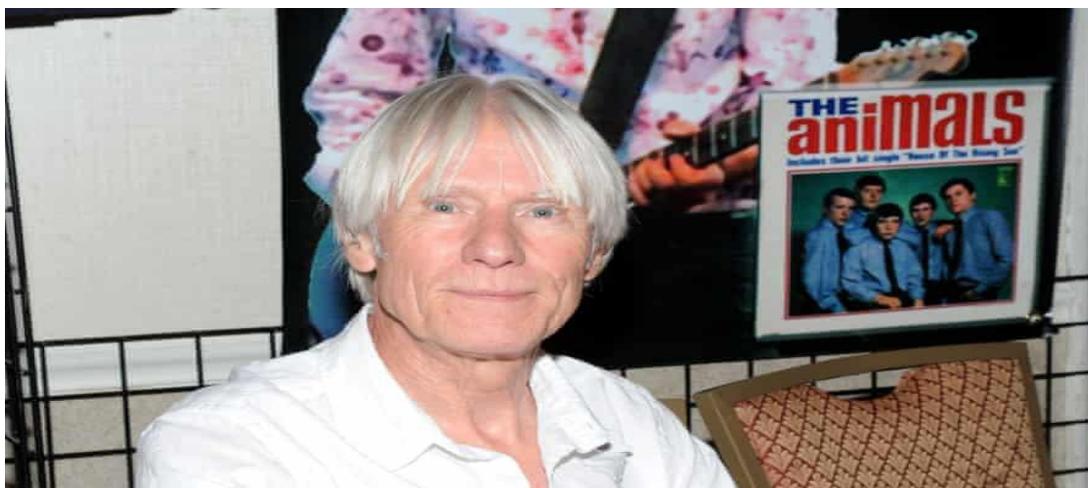
- [2 Kings 2.1-12](#)
- [Psalm 50.1-6](#)
- [2 Corinthians 4.3-6](#)
- [Mark 9.2-9](#)

(Transfiguration Sunday; St.Valentine's Day; & Quinquagesima)

The 'next Sunday before Lent' (Quinquagesima) falls this year on 14th February, and as every florist, greetings card retailer, romantically inclined teenager and chocolatier in the nation will tell you, this date traditionally triggers 'Valentine's Day.'

Consequently, we are expected to demonstrate our unrequited love for would-be partners or our affection for those currently closest to us by presenting them with a suitable gift, either anonymously or in person. However, Valentine is a spurious 'saint' at best, so I shall immediately shift target to his more local namesake (born in North Shields) for whom there is concrete evidence, namely ... Hilton Valentine. Who? I hear you all cry... or at least those born after 1980!

He was founding guitarist of the 60's group the 'Animals' and the man responsible for one of the most famous 'intros' in pop history, who has sadly died only two weeks ago, aged 77.



“A founding member and original guitarist of the Animals, Valentine was a pioneering guitar player influencing the sound of rock and roll for decades to come.”

Valentine formed the Animals in 1963 in Newcastle alongside singer Eric Burdon, bassist Chas Chandler, organist Alan Price and drummer John Steel.



The Animals in the 1960s. Left to right, Chas Chandler, John Steel, Hilton Valentine, Eric Burdon and Alan Price.

The band’s most famous song, a cover version of the blues standard ‘The House Of The Rising Sun’ topped the charts in the UK and the USA in 1964.

Valentine is credited with inventing the song’s famous arpeggio introductory riff, although it was initially rejected as a single by the band’s producer, Mickie Most, because **it was thought the four-and-a-half minute track was too long!**

But their treatment of the song (regarded as one of the inspirations for Bob Dylan going electric in 1965) has entered the annals of rock history, with the intro familiar over the decades to millions of budding guitarists around the world. After the success of ‘Rising Sun’, the band had a string of hits with other reworkings of classic blues songs such as ‘Don’t Let Me Be Misunderstood’ and ‘We Gotta Get Out Of This

Place', before the original line-up started to fall apart in the late 1960's. Valentine later produced one solo album called 'All In Your Head' and continued to perform in various reincarnations of the band for many years.

The critic Colin Larkin summed up the dramatic impact of 'The House Of The Rising Sun' in his Virgin Encyclopaedia of Popular Music, writing that the combination of Valentine's "now legendary but simplistic guitar introduction," Price's organ playing and Burdon's "bloodcurdling vocal" had helped give the band musical "immortality."

For those of you who have no idea what any of this is about, please click this YouTube link (below) to find out – alternatively, refresh your memory with the lyrics below:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4-43ILKaqBQ>

There is a house in New Orleans
They call the Rising Sun
And it's been the ruin of many a poor boy
And God, I know I'm one

My mother was a tailor
She sewed my new blue jeans
My father was a gamblin' man
Down in New Orleans

Now the only thing a gambler needs
Is a suitcase and a trunk
And the only time he's satisfied
Is when he's all drunk

Oh mother, tell your children
Not to do what I have done
Spend your lives in sin and misery
In the House of the Rising Sun

Well, I got one foot on the platform
The other foot on the train
I'm goin' back to New Orleans
To wear that ball and chain

Well, there is a house in New Orleans
They call the Rising Sun
And it's been the ruin of many a poor boy
And God, I know I'm one

So, what has this Geordie lad got to do with Quinquagesima and Transfiguration Sunday?

Well, as the Old Testament reading for today points out **'...thou hast asked a hard thing: nevertheless, if thou see me when I am taken from thee, it shall be so unto thee; but if not, it shall not be so'** (2Kings2.v10) for it was ever thus...

The significance of the 'Rising Sun' lyrics are widely debated. Yet, if you can trust that God is in all things ('visible and invisible') then he can speak to us through original lyrics and music which on the face of it appear irrelevant or merely secular.

When we look at the gospel set for today there is much misunderstanding amongst a crescendo of key figures. Jesus suddenly **'transfigured'** (made more beautiful) on the mountain top before his three closest friends (Peter, James, & John) with Moses and Elias also making a brief appearance. All three **'were sore afraid'** (understandably!) and Peter, not for the first time, gets the wrong end of the stick saying **'Master, it is good for us to be here; and let us make three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses; and one for Elias.'** This human response is common to everyone who has ever been placed out of their comfort zone. When under considerable stress, like Peter, we revert to whatever our most common default setting might be. His was initially to build a 'shelter.'

Then there is the ultimate climax, in the form of a voice from heaven, saying **'this is my beloved Son: hear him'** before things quickly reverted to normal, leaving the original four to come down from the mountain together, sworn to secrecy after their shared experience **'til the Son of man were risen from the dead.'**

Puzzling words perhaps, although **being isolated and misunderstood seems to be all part of the deal.**

It is necessary in our experience as human beings – because Jesus, the Son of Man, ‘did time’ in the wilderness, and what happened to him in that place is happening to us. In his life we see meaning in our own. So, what happened to Jesus? He was led by the Spirit (the actual word translates as “thrown out”) although in today’s text the language is less obvious - **‘leadeth them up into an high mountain’**(v2). It is from this point then, that our Christian training begins – where God, and you, and me all mingle – so that we cannot distinguish between what is us, and that which is greater than us.

Satan continuously tempts us throughout, with ‘reasonable’ voices in our head; and behind every temptation (large or small) is the temptation to distrust ourselves, to deny that it is the very Spirit of God which bears witness, with our Spirit.

In recent history we have we been regularly treated to the phrase ‘these are unprecedented times.’ The net result of this is that it almost becomes like ‘white noise,’ having little or no effect (like a cymbal crash being used in every beat of every bar, often making a four-and-a-half minute track seem endless). In contrast, this gospel delivers a true example of a genuinely unprecedented event illustrating a spiritual reality. We are asked to prepare for Lent in a unique way – rather than simply behaving like Peter and comfortably doing what we always do.

Each one of us is being encouraged to deliberately engage with new experiences, openly, patiently with our own personal wilderness, in simple trust that God can, given time, transfigure us too.

Conclusion

Part of our growth in faith requires a deliberate stepping out from our comfort zone (allowing God to make us more beautiful) and to experience true 'wilderness'.

Approaching Lent this year, with the added challenges of pandemic, we are encouraged to break the cycle of 'sin and misery' alluded to in the classic reworkings of blues music by Hilton Valentine and his 'Animals' friends.

We are set to experience a number of spiritual riffs and nuances in the weeks ahead. Perhaps the spiritual 'soundtrack' to our 2021 Lent experience might be to at least *entertain the possibility* that we can be transfigured by 'new' experiences that are always on offer?

If we can resist the relentless temptation to filter our many God-given and fresh opportunities (i.e. avoid building temporary 'shelters of comfort' that shield us from the true experience in front of our very eyes) then we will surely emerge from this particular mountain top/wilderness as a better and more enlightened people of God.

This all begins by accepting *your* wilderness, and then, from the story of the Son of Man, the reality of your unique Lent will '**hath shined in our hearts**' (2 Cor.4.6) as Paul helpfully reminds us, and subsequently made manifest in the wider world.

Finally, you will find brief moments when giving for true love's sake really satisfies, makes you feel truly alive and in communion with all things. It is at such moments that Christ's glory is revealed. We look at the trauma of our soul and are satisfied. Why? Because we discover that Lent is really only Easter in disguise!

Fr. Mike (14th February 2021)