Well, friends, we find ourselves staring down the barrel of another Lent. It seems almost impossible that we are only three days away from Ash Wednesday, but here we are. This gives me an opportunity to draw to your attention the fact that there will be a service of Holy Communion on Ash Wednesday - this coming Wednesday - at 10:30 a.m. [here] at Saint Briavels. If for any reason you can’t make a daytime service, there is also a service at 7:30 p.m. at Tutshill. I hope that you will make one of those services a priority if you possibly can. Lent is one of the most formative and powerful times of each year, as we walk again with our Lord towards the cross and the empty tomb.

But before we begin that journey, the church gives us a really special gift each year: the two Sundays before Lent begins, which are known these days by the rather prosaic titles of the Second Sunday before Lent, and the Sunday Next Before Lent, but those who remember and love the Prayer Book will remember and love also the rather more evocative titles of these two Sundays: Sexagesima and Quinquagesima Sundays.

What we are given in our Bible readings on these last two Sundays before we begin another Lent are two nuggets of grace. Two wonderful gifts of revelation, if you like, into the nature of God, and the reality of our world, which are there to give us a bit of a geeing up, a shot of adrenaline in the arm, if you like, before the 40 days begin.

Do remember that Jesus said to his disciples on the first Maundy Thursday evening, ‘I have lots of other things to say to you but you are not ready yet?’ Well this is the same thing going on. The church is saying to us, Lent is coming, it’s going to be tough, you need to dig back down into your prayer life, into your Bible reading, into your thinking about how you are in the face of God, but you’re not ready for that yet. First of all let’s remember some really important things about God. Here are two Sundays of encouragement, two glimpses of holiness, to fuel you up, to strengthen you for your journey.

So last Sunday we heard about creation. About the way in which God loves the world into being, and unfolds everything around us and its wonderful variety, and that it was all “very good”.

And this Sunday, just three days before we begin another 40 day - or actually 46 day if you count the Sundays - journey towards Easter, we get given two mountaintops to think about. The Sunday before Lent is all about mountains.

Because mountains, in the Bible, are very often the places where God does amazing things. Where we get the revealing of something really important and fundamental about God and us.

So in our first reading this morning we hear about Mount Sinai, the mountain where the law is delivered, the place where the 10 Commandments are inscribed on their two tablets of stone. And then our gospel reading we get another mountain, the mountain of Transfiguration, the mountain where Peter, James and John have this extraordinary experience, this moment of seeing Jesus as he really is, if you like of seeing through the veil, or beyond
the incarnation, and seeing the reality of God himself, of the glory of the Trinity.

I think it’s really interesting that mountains are one of the places where, in the Bible, people come closest to God. I suppose it is because they are in-between places, a bit in the same way as the sea. If you’ve ever been a mountain climber, or a sailor, you will know of that experience of being right on the edge of the known world, being right at the ragged edge of an environment that you can control. I’ve never been a mountain climber, but I have done a lot of sailing, and those moments where you are quite a long way out from shore, and in an environment that really is putting you in a place where you don’t have total control over your life, they are the moments where we become more aware of our dependence, of our smallness, of our humility and fragility.

Just think of some of the mountains in the Bible. It is on the top of Mount Ararat that Noah’s Ark comes to rest after the flood, when the waters are receding. Quite an appropriate story to think about following the rain of the past couple of weeks. It is on the mountain, in the cave, that Elijah experiences the earthquake, wind, and fire, and he hears the still small voice of calm. Keep thinking about other mountains. The mountain where fire is called down on the prophets of Baal. Move into the new Testament. Think about the sermon on the Mount. Think about the mountain from where Jesus ascends after his resurrection. Think about the mountains in the prophecy of Revelation.

These are thin places. Places where, if you like, the glory leaks through into our world. And that’s really important to hear on the Sunday before Lent. Because Lent is a dark time. Lent is a time of discipline, of self-denial. We will notice some changes in our worship. The clergy will go back into purple, the colour of waiting, of repentance. The Gloria will disappear from our service again until Easter. I don’t how strictly you enforce things here, but very often flowers disappear, or become very simple. If people choosing the hymns check them carefully enough, we stop singing ‘hallelujah’.

But before all of that, before we come face-to-face with the reality that we are fallen human beings, and begin to make our annual journey to try to put some of that right, we have these mountaintop experiences to contemplate.

So our first reading, as I’ve said, is all about the beginning of the giving of the Law. Moses goes up the mountain, clouds cover the mountain, the glory of the Lord appears in smoke and fire, and after 40 days, just after the bits that we heard this morning, Moses comes back down the mountain with the Ten Commandments. And you know for a long time those Ten Commandments were absolutely central to our worship. We hardly ever read them anymore, but I’d like to encourage you to maybe have a look at them again as part of your Lenten journey. They appear twice in the Bible, in Exodus and Deuteronomy. Or you can find them in your book of common prayer at the beginning of the communion service. Four Commandments about God, and six commandments about other people. And all 10 of them are about getting the relationship right. They’re about putting God first, and about putting the people who we encounter first as well. One of my churches two jobs ago had the 10 Commandments up on tablets either side of the altar, so that every time we looked towards the East, said the creed, or consecrated bread and wine, there was this reminder of our duty to God and to each other.

Now of course what happens in the Transfiguration takes us a little further, because it’s not just Moses who appears. Moses, the giver of the law. But also Elijah, the Prophet. So when Peter, James, and John encounter this weird, wonderful, amazing transfigured Jesus, glowing with holiness and divinity, they see
him flanked by the law and the prophets. In other words not just by a set of rules, but also a set of promises.

If you had to sum up all of those laws in the Old Testament in one word or phrase I wonder what you would come up with?
And I wonder about what you would come up with if you were challenged with the same idea about one word to sum up the prophets?

I haven’t got any clever answers for you. But at their most basic, all of the laws are about getting the relationship right between us and God. So maybe something like “you are not God”, might be a good way of summing up the law. And then for the prophets, how about “but God is coming to you.”? Prophecy is all about promise. Prophecy is about rescue, redemption, hope.

So lift up your hearts, as we approach Lent. And revisit the 10 Commandments. But as you do that, don’t read them as a set of dusty rules by which we can by ourselves into heaven. Reread them in the light of Jesus on the mountain of Transfiguration, alongside prophecy. Here is this promise, on the threshold of another Lent, that we are not God, but that doesn’t matter, because God is coming to us.

Amen.