

19th February 2023 – Morning Service

The Transfiguration

Olwen Meller

Call to Worship

This morning we look at the story of the Transfiguration when the disciples glimpsed something of the glory of God on the mountain top. We, too, get glimpses of God's glory; in the world he has made, through the written word, through the spoken word, through other people, through worship and prayer and through Jesus, the Living Word.

StF 25 – God is here

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| 1) God is here! As we his people
Meet to offer praise and prayer,
May we find in fuller measure
What it is in Christ we share.
Here, as in the world around us,
All our varied skills and arts
Wait the coming of his Spirit
Into open minds and hearts. | 3) Here our children find a welcome
In the Shepherd's flock and fold;
Here as bread and wine are taken,
Christ sustains us, as of old;
Here the servants of the Servant
Seek in worship to explore
What it means in daily living
To believe and to adore. |
| 2) Here are symbols to remind us
Of our lifelong need of grace;
Here are table, font, and pulpit;
Here the cross has central place.
Here in honesty of preaching,
Here in silence, as in speech,
Here, in newness and renewal,
God the Spirit comes to each. | 4) Lord of all, of Church and Kingdom,
In an age of change and doubt,
Keep us faithful to the gospel,
Help us work your purpose out.
Here, in this day's dedication,
All we have to give, receive:
We, who cannot live without you,
We adore you! We believe! |

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Opening prayers

To this act of worship Heavenly Father we bring ourselves: perhaps a little tired; perhaps a little preoccupied; expecting much, expecting little. And we bring our thoughts: some thankful and happy; some worried and anxious; some trivial and some deep. And we bring our words: the unexciting language of everyday; the difficult language of belief; the expressions of faith and fear, of doubt and hope. All the ordinariness of our daily lives we bring to this act of worship; that with Christ we might climb towards the mountaintop to meet God and find our human offerings transfigured by the glory of the divine love. **Amen**

Reading: Exodus 24:12 - 18

The Lord said to Moses, 'Come up to me on the mountain and stay here, and I will give you the tablets of stone with the law and commandments I have written for their instruction.' Then Moses set out with Joshua his assistant, and Moses went up on the mountain of God. He said to the elders, 'Wait here for us until we come back to you. Aaron and Hur are with you, and anyone involved in a dispute can go to them.' When Moses went up on the mountain, the cloud covered it, and the glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai. For six days the cloud covered the mountain, and on the seventh day the Lord called to Moses from within the cloud. To the Israelites the glory of the Lord looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain. Then Moses entered the cloud as he went on up the mountain. And he stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights.

StF 55 – Immortal, invisible

- 1) Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
In light inaccessible hid from our eyes,
Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
Almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise.
- 2) Unresting, unhasting, and silent as light,
Nor wanting, nor wasting, thou rulest in might
Thy justice like mountains high soaring above
Thy clouds which are fountains of goodness
and love.
- 3) To all life thou givest, to both great and small;
In all life thou livest, the true life of all;
We blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree,
And wither and perish; but naught
changeth thee.
- 4) Great Father of glory, pure Father of light,
Thine angels adore thee, all veiling their sight;
All praise we would render: O help us to see
'Tis only the splendour of light hideth thee.

Walter Chalmers Smith

Reading: Matthew 17:1 - 9

After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. Here he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. Peter said to Jesus, 'Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters – one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.' While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!' When the disciples heard this, they fell face down to the ground, terrified. But Jesus came and touched them. 'Get up,' he said. 'Don't be afraid.' When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, 'Don't tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.'

StF 20 – Be still for the presence of the Lord

- 1) Be still, for the presence of the Lord,
The Holy One is here.
Come, bow before Him now
With reverence and fear.
In Him no sin is found,
We stand on holy ground.
Be still, for the presence of the Lord,
The Holy One is here.
- 2) Be still, for the glory of the Lord
Is shining all around;
He burns with holy fire,
With splendour He is crowned,
How awesome is the sight,
Our radiant King of light!
Be still, for the glory of the Lord
Is shining all around.
- 3) Be still, for the power of the Lord
Is moving in this place,
He comes to cleanse and heal,
To minister His grace.
No work too hard for Him,
In faith receive from Him;
Be still, for the power of the Lord
Is moving in this place.

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Sermon

Both Matthew and the writer of the Exodus passage find it difficult to describe the majesty of God's glory, likening it to a bright cloud and a devouring fire. The story of the transfiguration is a beautiful story. But how are we to understand it? It is not clear exactly what happened - I don't think for one minute that Jesus was actually shining white but that is not to say that nothing happened on the mountain. Something did happen, because, years later, Peter still remembered it and he wrote in one of his letters 'We were eyewitnesses of his glory on the mountain.' The question is 'What is the evangelist telling us in this story?' Well, he's telling us about the identity of Jesus. Only a few details are given but they are very important.

We are told that the setting was a mountaintop. In Biblical tradition a mountain is the place of encounter with God. We are not told the name of the mountain but that's not really important. Tradition connects it with Mt Tabor in Galilee. On the mountain Jesus was flanked by Moses and Elijah - two of the most important figures in the Old Testament. Moses represented the law and Elijah the prophets. Thus, Jesus is seen as bringing the law and the prophets into fulfilment - in other words, he is the Messiah. Then a cloud overshadows them. The cloud is a symbol of the presence of God who cannot be seen by human eyes. And a voice from heaven declares something greater still about Jesus - namely - that he is God's Son - and this is what St Matthew is telling us in this story 'That Jesus is both the Messiah and the Son of God.'

This story is to be found in all three synoptic gospels. In St Mark's version the whole event clearly takes place for the benefit of the disciples to show them exactly who Jesus is and to strengthen them for the ordeal ahead. But its first, and chief, significance was for Jesus himself. The incident came at a crucial moment in Jesus's ministry. He had just begun his journey to Jerusalem. Up to this moment he had been working mainly in Galilee. He knew the fate that awaited him - the same fate that had befallen many of the prophets - namely a violent death. In Galilee he had received a lot of opposition from the religious leaders but in going to Jerusalem he was walking straight into the lion's den. Naturally he recoiled from such a fate and it seems that it was in order to pray that he went to the top of Mt Tabor.

The most important thing in Jesus' life was his relationship with his heavenly Father. That relationship was the ground beneath his feet for the whole of his life. So at the moment when the powers of darkness were massing against him it was to the Father he turned for guidance and strength. We don't know exactly what happened on the mountain - this story was written down some seventy years later - but it seems that there he heard the words of affirmation that he had heard at his baptism. He felt comforted. He knew that God was pleased with him and that God would give him the strength to face whatever lay ahead.

The story has significance for us too. Like Jesus and the apostles on Mt Tabor we too can experience moments of light and joy. We get glimpses of the promised land towards which we are travelling in faith. And at times we too can hear that voice whispering in our hearts 'You are my beloved son' or 'You are my beloved daughter.' And, like Jesus, we are reassured and strengthened so that we are able to face the future with confidence. It is also comforting to know that the road we are travelling is marked by the feet of countless holy people who have gone before us - especially by the feet of Jesus himself.

If we think back to Old Testament times when Moses was leading the children of Israel through the wilderness he was summoned into the presence of God, at the top of Mt Sinai - to receive two stone tablets - which would contain all the laws that God had written for the children of Israel. This was an experience shrouded from view by the cloud that descended upon the mountain - and it was here that he was given the law by which the Israelites were to live. The fact that it was a mountain top is central to the story and as it is mentioned several times it is clearly of deep significance.

Mountains play an important role both in the story of Israel and the story of Jesus. God's presence in the story is overwhelming but it is never directly described and this is a normal pattern in Old Testament scriptures. The images of light, fire and cloud are used to indicate God's presence and together they present a frightening and awe inspiring image, but it is God's glory that is always reflected in those images.

Here it appeared as a consuming fire, in which Moses remained for forty days - a similar length of time spent by Jesus in the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry - in fact - it had such an effect on Moses - that when he eventually descended the mountain his radiant face provoked such fear among the Israelites that they demanded that he wore a veil - so great was the impact of that encounter upon him.

In St Matthew's account of the transfiguration he makes the most of setting out the role of Jesus as the new Moses - the new law giver. The appearance of the fiery cloud from which God speaks is common to both the transfiguration and the giving of the law. Just as the face of Moses shone - so the face of Jesus shines like the sun. Moses, himself, had prophesied that a prophet like him would rise up in the future and, in the words of Moses - 'when he arrives Israel must listen to him'; - the exact words with which the divine encounter on the Mt of Transfiguration is concluded. When Peter, James and John witnessed the transfiguration of Jesus, it must have been a most awe inspiring occasion for them - one that they would never forget and one that changed their lives.

Several years ago there was a programme on television entitled 'Extreme Dreams.' It was a programme in which Ben Fogle selected - from a group of applicants - a team to trek with him for several days across dangerous terrain, bogs, jungle, deserts through blistering heat and intense cold until they were at the absolute limits of their endurance - and then when they felt that they could go no further they had to climb to the summit of a high mountain from which the view was absolutely spectacular - making all the struggle, the pain and the misery worthwhile. They didn't all make it to the end. Many fell by the wayside for all sorts of reasons, mainly illness or injury. They were all people who had suffered some sort of tragedy in their lives but they were given this opportunity in order to give them encouragement and help them turn their lives around.

Mountain top experiences are something to be savoured. A few years ago we went to stay with friends at their holiday home in the French Alps, and, one day when the weather was particularly good David suggested that we made a trip up Mont Blanc, and so, we set off for Chamonix, about fifteen miles away, and went by cable car and lift to the top. I tend to be a bit claustrophobic and was not at all happy being squashed in a cable car, then a lift, but I had no choice - I was bundled in by my three companions. Lynne said to me 'Once you get to the top you won't want to come down again' and she was right. It was a most fantastic experience. Everywhere was covered in snow - mountains as far as the eye could see - it was completely white and we could see into Italy and Switzerland. The sky was clear blue and as the clouds came and went we had the most wonderful views of the top of Mont Blanc. Looking out over snow covered mountains I could have stayed there for ever. It was an experience I shall never forget.

Taking the group of intrepid adventurers through jungles and swamps until they reached the summit of the mountain - was something Ben Fogle hoped they would never forget and something that he hoped would change their lives for ever. For many of us there have been times, like Peter, James and John when we have stood on the mountain top - been on 'cloud nine'. On top of the world where everything felt good and right. When our faith was strong and when we said 'God's in his heaven, all's right with the world', and we give thanks to God for those good times when all has gone well, when we felt confident and happy, when the horizon was clear and the sun was shining.

But also, like Peter, James and John we too have to come down from the mountaintop and face the world in the valley below - to confront the challenges of life and work - to walk in the valley of disappointment, loss and bereavement - when all seems dark and empty and the future looks bleak - and then we say 'Where is God in all this?' Peter wanted to stay on the mountaintop. He wanted to hold on to the blessedness of the experience. He didn't want to go down to the everyday - common things again - but to remain for ever in the enchanted land - a bit like us really. But Jesus summoned him back down the mountainside to face the future.

If we are spared the most cruel emotions we may find it difficult to identify with and support those who do confront them. That experience was not meant to provide an escape from the struggle that lay ahead but to help him face it. And the same applies to us. We need our mountaintop moments - those 'wow' experiences that give us courage and hope - but to live on the mountaintop - sheltered from the hurly burly of life - would be selfish and self-centred - not to say impossible. On Mt Tabor the apostles got a glimpse of the glory that belonged to Jesus the Son of God. So wonderful was that experience that Peter proclaimed 'Lord it is good for us to be here.'

And surely it is good for us to be here - to be part of the world-wide church. We are created for relationships with each other and with God and it is in making and developing those relationships that life has meaning. We can only pray that our eyes may be open to God's presence in those we meet and - maybe - in focussing on them we, too, may see flashes of his glory. Amen.

StF 260 – Swiftly pass the clouds of glory

- 1) Swiftly pass the clouds of glory,
Heaven's voice, the dazzling light;
Moses and Elijah vanish;
Christ alone commands the height!
Peter, James, and John fall silent,
Turning from the summit's rise
Downward toward the shadowed valley
Where their Lord has fixed his eyes.
- 2) Glimpsed and gone the revelation,
They shall gain and keep its truth,
Not by building on the mountain
Any shrine or sacred booth,
But by following the Saviour
Through the valley to the cross
And by testing faith's resilience
Through betrayal, pain, and loss.
- 3) Lord, transfigure our perception
With the purest light that shines
And recast our life's intentions
To the shape of your designs,
Till we seek no other glory
Than what lies past Calvary's hill
And our living and our dying
And our rising by your will.

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Prayers of Intercession

Lord, we pray for your world and all the hurting people in it
For those who are hurting because of natural disasters
For those who are hurting because of war and fighting between nations
For those who are hurting because they are starving or have little food
For those who are hurting because they have nowhere to live - those whose homes have been destroyed
For those who are hurting because wrong things have been said or done to them
For those who are hurting because of wrong choices they have made
Those who are hurting because they have lost those they have loved most
We pray that they may know that on the cross you shared all their hurt and pain, and that because you are Lord you share all that hurts us today.
Lord we pray that you hold the hurting world in your gentle, loving, healing hands
We ask this in Jesus' name. **Amen**

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come;
thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the
glory for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name, your kingdom come,
your will be done, on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are
yours now and for ever. **Amen.**

StF 59 – Lord the light of your love

1) Lord, the light of Your love is shining
In the midst of the darkness, shining;
Jesus, Light of the World, shine upon us,
Set us free by the truth You now bring us,
Shine on me, shine on me.

*Ch) Shine, Jesus, shine,
Fill this land with the Father's glory;
Blaze, Spirit, blaze,
Set our hearts on fire.
Flow, river, flow,
Flood the nations with grace and mercy;
Send forth Your word, Lord,
And let there be light.*

2) Lord, I come to Your awesome presence,
From the shadows into Your radiance;
By the blood I may enter Your brightness,
Search me, try me, consume all my darkness.
Shine on me, shine on me.

3) As we gaze on Your kingly brightness
So our faces display Your likeness,
Ever changing from glory to glory,
Mirrored here may our lives tell Your story.
Shine on me, shine on me.

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Blessing

Jesus was transfigured on the mountain. We, too, can have moments of transfiguration. Sometimes a blessedness comes down around us and glory falls upon us from God and life is sweet. In his love for us, God allows us to taste on earth the joys of the world to come. Lord, give us confidence in your unchanging love for us. Help us to follow you with courage, and lead us to the glory that never fades. And may the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with you now and for evermore. **Amen**