

A service for 27th February, 2022 (StF)

Call to Worship: Psalm 99 verse 9

Exalt the LORD our God and worship at his holy mountain, for the LORD our God is holy. Amen.

“All praise we would render; O help us to see / 'Tis only the splendour of light hideth thee.” This morning we shall consider the transfiguration of Christ which shows how the brightness of God’s glory is revealed in Jesus and through him God is now accessible. We are going to sing a hymn by Revd. Walter Chalmers Smith, who in 1893 became Moderator of the Free Churches of Scotland. Hymn, number 55, ‘Immortal, invisible, God only wise,’

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.³

4. Great Father of glory, pure Father of light,

Thine angels adore thee, all veiling their sight;

All laud we would render; O help us to see

'Tis only the splendour of light hideth thee.

5. 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.

© W. Chalmers Smith {1824 – 1908}

Let us pray

Almighty God, Creator of heaven and earth, we have come to worship and adore you today. Author and Sustainer of all life, we have come to worship and adore you today. Saviour of the world, our true Light and Guide, we have come to worship and adore you today, for you created us in your image, gave us stewardship over the world and have striven to draw us into the closest of relationships with you, where, as your earthly children, we may call you ‘Abba’, ‘Daddy’. Your love for us is so remarkable that, even when we set ourselves against you and made ourselves your enemy, you persevered and shared our mortal flesh by coming as Jesus Christ.

Jesus grew up among people like us, sharing our hopes and fears, joys and sorrows, our trials and temptations, yet did so without sinning, showing us how you want us to live. We believe his death and resurrection broke the shackles of sin and death and through Christ we have eternal life through faith in him. Therefore, amazing heavenly Father, take away all our anxieties and distractions, so we may pray to you in faith, sing your praises joyfully and listen to your guiding word, so we can offer you all honour, glory power and praise in our worship, in Jesus’ holy name. Amen.

Let us offer a prayer of thanksgiving and confession to the Lord. When I say, 'Lord, in your mercy', please reply, 'Hear our prayer'.

Heavenly Father, thank you for your boundless, steadfast love that has not only given us a beautiful, self-sustaining planet on which to live, but offers us blessings day-by-day. Thank you for opportunities and experiences that fulfil us, for challenges that shape our character and for people who have blessed us by their example and loving-care. Most of all, thank you for loving us at times when we are faithless, loveless and unlovable.

'Lord, in your mercy' 'Hear our prayer'.

Merciful Lord, we ask you to pardon and restore us as we recall times when we have not loved you wholeheartedly, when we have ignored your call to serve you, when we have failed to care for our neighbours as we know we ought, especially when they are in distress, or need help. Forgive us, too, when we try to justify our sinfulness, rather than do what we know we should. Help us to change our ways, to become less self-centred and more Christ-centred.

'Lord, in your mercy' 'Hear our prayer'.

Gracious and faithful God, we believe that you have heard our prayer and have not only forgiven us, but you call us to follow you once more, unburdened by guilt. Therefore, Lord, as you offer us a fresh start, fill us now with the power of the Holy Spirit to love and serve both you and our neighbours faithfully and joyfully in the blessed name of Christ Jesus our Lord and Friend. Amen.

We shall say the prayer our Lord taught his disciples:

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.

We shall sing a hymn written in 1952 by George Wallace Briggs to celebrate the publication of the Revised Standard Version of the Holy Bible. Hymn number 157,

'God has spoken – by his prophets,'

1. God has spoken – by his prophets,

Spoken his unchanging word,

Each from age to age proclaiming

God, the one, the righteous Lord.

'Mid the world's despair and turmoil

One firm anchor holds us fast:

God is King, his throne eternal,

God the first and God the last.

2. God has spoken – by Christ Jesus,

Christ, the everlasting Son,

Brightness of the Father's glory,

With the Father ever one;

Spoken by the Word incarnate,

God from God, ere time was born,

Light from Light, to earth descending,

Man, revealing God to all.

3. God has spoken – by his Spirit,

Speaking to our hearts again,

**In the age-long word expounding
God's own message, now as then.
Through the rise and fall of nations
One sure faith is standing fast;
God still speaks, the Word unchanging,
God the first and God the last.**

© George Wallace Briggs (1875 – 1959)

We come now to our prayers of intercession. Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, every day you bless us with your love, so in response we offer ourselves to act as your earthly hands. We recognize that our own powers are limited and confess that at times the brokenness of our world threatens to overwhelm us. However, we are not afraid to ask you to reach out to inspire people with more ability, power and influence who can heal the suffering we see around us, for we know that to you all things are possible.

Lord, give us the courage to play what part we can to build a better world by campaigning against injustice, by doing all we can to relieve poverty, by using the earth's resources more carefully and by learning to share them, rather than fighting over them.

We pray for people from the Developing World who are desperately short of COVID19 vaccines, at the same time that surplus vaccines are becoming time-expired in warehouses. We pray that leaders of nations that have excess vaccines will take steps for them to be distributed, not only to protect our poorer brothers and sisters against coronavirus, but so fewer strains of COVID emerge to threaten us.

Lord of shalom, we pray for peace in a time of heightened tensions between Ukraine and Russia which could spill into open conflict. May negotiators find ways to de-escalate the current situation and find ways in which Russia and Ukraine can co-exist peacefully. Indeed, we pray that you will teach the leaders of all nations to find better ways of resolving differences with neighbours, rather than resorting to force. May they learn to rule with justice and mercy, for only then can true peace prevail.

Remember, O Lord, all victims of warfare, terrorism and persecution. Grant them the support and encouragement they need to find healing in body, mind and spirit as well as being able to rebuild their lives. Hear our prayers for our brothers and sisters who endure discrimination because of their race, colour or creed and help us work to end prejudice by our own example of loving-kindness.

We pray for the people of Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Yemen and Sudan where famines and conflicts threaten the lives of millions. We ask that governments and relief agencies are able and willing to avert large-scale catastrophes in these countries.

Gracious Lord, look with compassion on people who are sick in body, mind, or spirit, particularly those whose condition has been worsened as a result of a lack of treatment during the last two years of pandemic. Help them find healing, renewed strength and hope, not only as a result of professional care and support they may receive, but by experiencing your loving presence in their need.

Lord, hear our prayer for people who have lost loved-ones directly because of COVID19, for others who have lost loved-ones for other reasons during this pandemic and for whom funerals and mourning have been restricted; we pray for neighbours who are suffering from long COVID19, depression and anxiety, for all who have lost work, or who are burdened by debt because lockdown; we think of neighbours who are lonely, afraid, or who feel abandoned, people whose relationships have broken down and, not least of all, children whose education and wellbeing have been seriously harmed during the pandemic.

In a time of silence, we bring to mind people around us who are in special need of your care and, as we name them before you, we are confident you will know their needs and will reach out to them in loving-kindness:
Lord, wherever possible, help us to offer them practical support and friendship and embrace everybody for whom we pray with the warmth of your love, offering them healing, courage, comfort and lasting peace.

Holy God, we pray for our church, churches in our district and, indeed, the World Church as we begin to emerge from the shadow of coronavirus. Help us learn new, effective ways to serve our communities and to reflect the goodness and grace of Jesus by serving him with united, faithful hearts.

Lord, may we never forget the people who have worked steadfastly to support us throughout this pandemic: workers in the NHS, carers both in homes and in the community, scientists who are developing both anti-COVID vaccines and medicines, besides the army of key-workers in production, transportation, warehousing and retail throughout the country. Bless them all and may they remain successful and safe in their work.

Abba, Heavenly Father, bless us, our friends and our families. Keep us safe in your care and help us to share the abundance of your love with our neighbours, so our lives bring you honour through Christ Jesus our Lord and friend. Amen.

Our Gospel reading is Luke chapter 9 verses 28 to 43

About eight days after Jesus said this, he took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray. As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendour, talking with Jesus. They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfilment at Jerusalem. Peter and his companions were very sleepy, but when they became fully awake, they saw his glory and the two men standing with him. As the men were leaving Jesus, Peter said to him, "Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." (He did not know what he was saying.) While he was speaking, a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. A voice came from the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him." When the voice had spoken, they found that Jesus was alone. The disciples kept this to themselves, and told no one at that time what they had seen.

The next day, when they came down from the mountain, a large crowd met him. A man in the crowd called out, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son, for he is my only child. A spirit seizes him and he suddenly screams; it throws him into convulsions so that he foams at the mouth. It scarcely ever leaves him and is destroying him. I begged your disciples to drive it out, but they could not."

"O unbelieving and perverse generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you and put up with you? Bring your son here." Even while the boy was coming, the demon threw him to the ground in a convulsion. But Jesus rebuked the evil spirit, healed the boy and gave him back to his father. And they were all amazed at the greatness of God. Amen.

We continue our worship with a hymn written by Thomas Troeger, professor of Christian communication at Yale Divinity school and a minister in both the

Presbyterian and Episcopal Churches of the USA. Hymn number 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.**

© Thomas Troeger (Born 1945)

Sermon: "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him." Luke 9: 35

In Exodus, we read how Moses' face glowed so much after he had spoken to God on Mount Sinai the Israelites were afraid to approach him, so he veiled his face, except in the presence of the Lord. On the other hand, in Luke's account of the transfiguration it was Jesus' whole being that was irradiated with dazzling light as he prayed upon a mountain, witnessed by Peter, James and John, his inner-circle of disciples. Jesus had taken his friends up the mountain while he prayed, shortly after Peter had declared Jesus to be the Messiah, 'the Christ of God' and after our Lord had told them of his imminent passion, death and resurrection.

Luke's gospel omitted Peter's dissention, but instead used the Transfiguration to corroborate Jesus' divinity. Whether or not the details of his clothes becoming as dazzling as a flash of lightning are meant literally, or are Luke's way of trying to describe the Shekinah, the power and glory of God in Jesus as he prayed, is difficult to determine. The most significant details are that Peter, James and John recognised the glory of God in both his transformed appearance as he prayed and in his meeting with Moses and Elijah. Notice how, just as in the Garden of Gethsemane, the disciples had been sleeping, so they awoke to see the Lord as a radiant figure in company with the giver of Law, Moses and the greatest prophet, Elijah. Both patriarchs met God on a mountain in the Scriptures, so it was appropriate that they should also meet Jesus 'in glorious splendour'. Elijah, Moses and Jesus spoke of Jesus' 'departure' which he would fulfil in Jerusalem. The Greek word used by Luke for departure, is '**exodos**', showing that, **just as Moses had led God's people to freedom from slavery in**

Egypt, so Christ would lead his people to freedom from slavery to sin. Again, this reinforced Jesus' warnings of his coming passion, death and resurrection, without which God's salvation could not have been accomplished.

Needless to say, the three disciples were awestruck, but as always Peter felt obliged to say something. As he had seen the glory of God in Jesus, he wanted to prolong the experience, so he suggested that he and his friends should erect shelters for Christ, Moses and Elijah. However, the three holy figures were suddenly enveloped in cloud, leaving the disciples terrified as the voice of God commanded, "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him." Next instant they saw Jesus on his own and were so overcome by the experience that they told no one for some time, probably because they could find no way of expressing what they had witnessed.

Whilst we may not have experienced as profound an experience of Christ as did the three disciples, we may still find it difficult to share our faith in Jesus with others. It may be that we fear being mocked, or rejected. Perhaps we are afraid that our efforts to share the Good News will fail because of our lack of faith. When Jesus returned to the foot of the mountain, he was met with a complaint from an anxious father that the other nine followers had been unable to cure his epileptic son. Jesus was neither rebuking the father, nor his disciples, when he said, "**O unbelieving and perverse generation, how long shall I stay with you and put up with you?**" but the crowd generally. After all, the father clearly believed Jesus could cure the boy and the disciples had at least tried to cure him. Jesus' rebuke was for the crowd who would witness the healing, yet who would fail to see or acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah. We are challenged to be like Peter, James and John: to reflect upon Jesus' glory and grace, but then to share it, trusting that the Holy Spirit will give us the words to take Good News to our neighbours.

A significant aspect of the Transfiguration is the way in which Jesus made time to pray, even in the midst of his hectic ministry. Time and again we read of his going to a private place to pray, especially when he faced crises. I still find it difficult to sit quietly and reflectively when I pray, especially at work. I am aware that my life is often so busy that I feel guilty unless I am always on the go, so during Lent I'm going to try to use my time better.

As we approach Lent, rather than feeling obliged to give up something we enjoy, why not make time to be with God, rather than doing for God, to reflect upon something wonderful in his creation around us, to pray and praise him for all he does for us, to listen in that silence for any new direction he wants us to take? This, after all, sustained Jesus. Let's follow John Greenleaf Whittier's words:

**"With that deep hush subduing all
Our words and works that drown
The tender whisper of thy call,
As noiseless let thy blessing fall
As fell thy manna down".**

***May the radiance of the risen Lord transfigure and transform our discipleship to his glory and may we make the time and space to seek him in reflective prayer.
Amen.***

Our closing hymn is: 'Transfigured Christ, none comprehends'. It was penned in 1991 by Alan Gaunt, a Mancunian Congregational minister. We sing hymn number 261.

**1. Transfigured Christ, none comprehends
Your majesty, whose splendour stuns
All waking souls; whose light transcends**

The brightness of a thousand suns!

**2. You stand with Moses on the hill,
You speak of your new exodus:
The way through death, you will fulfil
By dying helpless on the cross.**

**3. You stand here with Elijah, too,
By whom the still small voice was heard:
And you, yourself, will prove God true,
Made mute in death, Incarnate Word.**

**4. If we could bear your brightness here
And stay for ever in your light,
Then we would conquer grief and fear,
And scorn the terrors of the night.**

**5. But, from the heights, you bring us down,
To share earth's agonies with you,
Where piercing thorns are made your crown
And death, accepted, proves love true.**

**6. Majestic Christ, God's well-loved Son,
If we must share your grief and loss,
Transfigure us, when all is done,
With glory shining from your cross.**

© Alan Gaunt (born 1935)

Benediction

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all now and for evermore. Amen.