Transfiguration Sunday

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The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to thank Rev Dr Douglas Galbraith, Secretary of the Church Service Society, for his thoughts on Transfiguration Sunday.

Contents

Introduction ........................................................................................................................................... 2
Exodus 24: 12-18 ..................................................................................................................................... 2
Psalm 2.................................................................................................................................................... 3
2 Peter 1: 16-21 ........................................................................................................................................ 3
Matthew 17: 1-9 ..................................................................................................................................... 4
Sermon Ideas ......................................................................................................................................... 5
Time with Children ............................................................................................................................... 10
Prayers ................................................................................................................................................... 11
Musical Suggestions ............................................................................................................................ 12
Additional Resources ........................................................................................................................... 14
Helping people prepare for reading the Bible in worship can make a real difference. Overcoming nerves, reading in ways suitable to the text, speaking clearly etc.

You may wish to email these three links to the people reading Scripture on Sunday to support them in their involvement in worship: Managing your nerves; Creative readings; Worship at the Lectern

Introduction

From the ninth century until the publication of the Revised Common Lectionary, the Eastern date for the Feast of the Transfiguration, August 6, had been followed by the church in the West. The new position of the Last Sunday after the Epiphany came from the Lutheran tradition, and one can see from the internal signals in the gospel accounts that this not only makes narrative sense but adds theological and spiritual insight. Scholarship explains that the use of the word 'after' is not just sequential but signals a relationship between two events. This event comes 'after' Peter's declaration at Caesarea Philippi and Jesus' teaching that true messiahship takes the way of suffering and death, and that his followers would be those who took up their cross and followed. Now the vista from the mountain is across the whole stretch of Lent when we pace ourselves with our Lord on his journey to the cross, seeking to match our lives and our worship to the quickening pace of God's saving work in Christ.

Exodus 24: 12-18

The question this and surrounding chapters seek to answer, perhaps from the later perspective of Temple worship, is how can we know when we worship that we are not calling into a vacuum? What should we do or say, how should we structure our approach, so that we are more likely to meet and be addressed by God? This and previous chapters suggest a careful and orderly, rather than a casual but well-meaning, approach: the people at the foot of the mountain taking part in extended preparation, the representatives of the people half way up, Moses and Joshua continuing onwards, building the connection, as it were, with the living God. But it is not a one-way impulse; the cloud signifies the movement of God to meet them. God breaks into our world even as we worship. There are two other insights that we may glean: that the coming of God can be a disturbing, even dangerous, event (special persons are chosen to prepare the ground, to
represent God to the people and the people to God); secondly – a true act of worship cannot be hidden but is to be seen by all. It is no wonder that in our tradition we refer to the Sunday service as 'public worship', an aspect so important that a higher council has to adjudicate if it is proposed on one day not to hold it, even for a good reason.

**Psalm 2**

The lectionary gives a psalm each week, closely allied to the first reading, for the people to speak or sing. In the Scottish Psalter of 1929, today's psalm was not included among the psalms 'most suitable for use in public worship', and there is no version of Psalm 2 in the current Church Hymnary. Yet it has much to say to us. We have spoken of the public nature of true worship, and the psalm supports this emphasis – that the presence of God in the world is a high profile event.

One of the 'royal' psalms, it sees human kingship as embedded in the kingship of God who rules from Mount Zion, a psalm that, in face of the pain of constant war and its terrible consequences, finds security in God's ultimate rule in world, expressed through the messianic king. Possibly arising from coronation ritual during the monarchic period, it reads as if spoken by the king in a worship setting surrounding the ascent to the throne, affirming that the power of the king rests in God and not in political schemes. Both the passage from Exodus and this psalm prepare us to understand the Transfiguration as not something beyond this world but rather the very descent of God into the world and among humanity, and that transfiguration is not complete until all aspects of our world are remade, suggested in the psalmist's language of the king being adopted as the son of God.

**2 Peter 1: 16-21**

It's the last book of the New Testament to have been written – no Christian writer refers to it before 200 – and thus gives us insight into the church as it has become in the second century, at a time when the Pauline letters had been collected (see 3:15-16). While the apostle Peter himself could not have been the author, the writer not only takes Peter's voice but cites incidents in which Peter was involved. In a time when scholarly authority and consensus had not been developed, those who were members of, or on the fringes of, Christian communities could bring their own interpretations to those parts of Scripture available to them, interpretations that were
often quite 'off the wall'. The 'cleverly devised myths' that the author deplores were probably the esoteric mystery cults that had derived their 'authority' from Scripture, often involving cosmological schemes and bizarre practices that were the preserve of initiates. Another example would be sexual promiscuity, the norm in certain of the new cultures the Gospel was reaching, and which seemed to many to be encouraged rather than contained by Pauline teaching on freedom from the restraints of the Law. There would have also been the influence of the Gnostic heresy (earlier the target for Colossians and the Pastoral Epistles), which maintained that knowledge of the truth was all that was needful for salvation, and what we do with our bodies is a matter of indifference. The writer urges his readers to go behind these teachings to the person and work of Jesus Christ himself. He appeals to the account of the Transfiguration, with 'himself' as an eyewitness, proving the authenticity of Scripture and its prophetic teachings, but warns that interpretation cannot rest with any individual but belongs to the whole faith community (vv.20-21), taught by these witnesses to divine revelation.

Matthew 17: 1-9

As we noted in the introduction, the Transfiguration (the Greek word is the root of 'metamorphosis') is shown by the gospel writer as belonging in the context of Peter's affirmation: You are the Messiah, and Jesus' subsequent attempt to ready them for his Passion and for what must happen to those who followed in his way. The narrative is full of reference to rich themes in Israelite history, with the presence of Moses and Elijah signifying the belief that Christ is the Messiah as testified in the Law and the Prophets. We are told that it was 'six days later' that Jesus took Peter, James and John with him to the mountain, reminiscent of the six days on Mount Sinai when the cloud ('the glory of the Lord') covered the mountain before, on the seventh, God spoke. And as God met with Moses in the cloud, and as his face shone after this divine encounter (see also Exodus 34), so Jesus' face shines in glory (cf. Rev.1:16 – 'his face was like the sun, shining with full force'), his garments are bleached white, and there is heard the affirming voice of God, as at his Baptism, with the additional command, 'Listen to him' (the Hebrew word has the sense of 'hear and obey'). The disciples fall on their faces, to be raised by Jesus, now alone, with a touch and the command, 'Get up', both so reminiscent of his healing encounters. Here many see an anticipation of the Resurrection and of the Parousia (cf. the way
this incident is prefaced in Mark 9:1 which speaks of the Kingdom of God coming with power), but it is also a revelation for a few moments of the glory which even then, before his Passion, belonged to Jesus. As a 'temporary exhibition of his glory', it enabled the disciples after the Resurrection, in looking back, to realise that 'even during the time that he emptied himself, he continued to retain his divinity entire, though it was concealed under the veil of the flesh' (Calvin).

Sermon Ideas

1. Transfigured as we walk the way of Jesus
2. The inner and the outer person
3. The temptation to hold on to what we know
4. Learning about worship

1. Transfigured as we walk the way of Jesus

‘For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.’ (1 Cor. 15: 3, 4) The Gospel of the early church was not simply that Jesus was the expected Messiah of the Jews, but that he was the crucified and risen Messiah of all people. Hence great importance was given to the passion narrative in the Gospels.

The story of the Transfiguration stands at the beginning of the passion narrative. Before that, Jesus has said that a follower must take up his cross day after day. St. Ephrem, an East Syrian church father, translated this saying of Jesus as that a disciple must take up his cross on his shoulders and walk after Jesus. The Transfiguration is about the suffering Messiah and costly discipleship.

1. The event of transfiguration is to be seen in relation to Peter’s confession and the teaching of Jesus about his death and the nature of Christian discipleship. The confession of Peter is that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. Jesus then tells the disciples that the Messiah is one who suffers. Matthew and Mark do not tell us what Moses and Elijah were talking to Jesus about on the mountain, but Luke says it was about all that was to happen at Jerusalem (Luke 9: 31).
2. Jesus was transfigured. While he was praying, the appearance of his face changed. It was not merely the external appearance that was changed. The light which transfigured him completely was shining from inside. The transfiguration was not the throwing away of the mask of humanity. It was not ceasing to be human. It was the human Jesus who was transfigured. The face that was radiant and shone was the human face of the human Jesus. It was the radiant face of a Son who submitted himself to obey God’s will; his cross was the secret of the radiance and transfiguration. A number of eastern church fathers have taught that God became human so that human beings might become divine. To become divine is not to become God, but to remain as human and be transfigured, to be filled with divine light. By God becoming human, he has given the possibility for every human being to be transformed, to be filled with the divine light. Transfiguration is not magic but the destiny of all creation in Christ – to be transformed and filled with the divine light.

3. While they were talking, a cloud overshadowed them and they heard the voice of God: 'Listen to him'. What do we hear when we listen? Jesus says, ‘If any one wishes to be a follower of mine, he must leave self behind and take up his cross and follow me.’ To listen to Jesus, to be a disciple of Jesus, is to walk with Jesus to Golgotha. As we walk with him, as we talk with him, our human nature is being transformed into the likeness of divine nature. The period of Lent is a time when we specially think of our life as a journey to Calvary in the company of Jesus. As we walk with our crosses on our shoulders, as we come nearer and nearer to Golgotha, we are also being transformed and transfigured. The life and the light of the cross will shine on our face. To be filled with the divine light is our destiny.

The shape of the above outline is derived from a sermon by the late Dr T V Philip, a member of the Indian Mar Thoma Church, at that time teaching in Trinity Theological College, Brisbane where I met and heard him.

The sermon might continue and conclude by continuing this theme to speak of the transfiguration of the world. The late Leith Fisher, in his commentary on St Matthew, But I say unto you (St Andrew Press), writes:

'The event of the Transfiguration takes place on a quiet hill before three amazed disciples far from the corridors of power. It occurs at the margins, far from the metropolitan heartland, yet
we should have no doubts that this is a story about power. It's a story which raises the question of where the real power lies in the world.' He goes on to recall Hiroshima, which took place on the 'old' date of the commemoration of the Transfiguration, August 6, and more recent wars. He goes on: 'It remains much easier to win a war than to build a peace. The resurrection of a nation is a slow and painstaking business, as is the healing and mending of bodies and souls, the nurturing of new life and the care of the vulnerable and the frail. Such is the cross way, and as the Transfiguration affirms, the God way. The power to nurture and mend, to bring new life out of the deadest of ends by the slow way of love ... is the power of which the Gospel speaks and makes manifest in Jesus ... It is the power of God entrusted into our human hands' (page 213).

2. The inner and the outer person
This may be developed within no. 1 above or it could focus specifically on the appearance of the person of Christ at the Transfiguration, reference to which could form the opening part of the sermon.

Human beings live between the outer and the inner person. The writer of a book on pastoral ministry suggests that these two facets are often at war with one another, and that the reason is often our feelings of shame, a shame strong enough to lock down our personalities. Shame can arise from an event in the past or a current habit that cannot easily be broken; it can relate to appearance, or social status, or cultural origins, or our believed inadequacies. One observer wrote: 'We wear our roles outside and our shabby incognito inside. We avoid the exposure which would bring us into the public gaze, at least as far as our anxieties are concerned.' Another said: 'We choose to wall ourselves off in our zones of comfort and predictability.' So, the reality is that we have our public lives, we have our private lives, but we also have our hidden lives, where pain affects our ability to love, to enjoy fully the glories of existence, the richness of relationships with others. It was the human Jesus who was transfigured. The face that was radiant and shone was the human face of the human Jesus. It was the radiant face of a son who submitted himself to obey God's will; his cross was the secret of the radiance and transfiguration (TV Philip, see above). To 'take up our cross on our shoulders and walk after Jesus' (ditto) is to shoulder a shame that is brought to healing and transformation in the Passion and Resurrection of Christ.
3. The temptation to hold on to what we know

'It is good for us to be here. ...Let us build three tents...' This was obviously a part of the narrative that brought some embarrassment to those who recalled or recounted it. They variously explain it away by suggesting the disciples didn't know what to say because they were terrified (Mark), because they did not know what they said being 'weighed down with sleep' (Luke), while both Matthew and Luke make clear that their offer was interrupted almost in mid-sentence by the voice of God affirming not all three but One alone.

It was understandable that the disciples would say this. What is happening both excites and threatens. The impulse is to try and get things under control, try to make sense of things, to be busy. But also at that moment they were experiencing a state which pointed beyond the pain and travail of life, a moment of truth, glory, and promise.

It is a temptation to want to capture and dwell in a particular time of happiness, success, peace. It can lead to a hankering after the past to the detriment of living in the present. In the church community it can stand in the way of listening to the voices of our time and finding the form that church and gospel have to take. We cannot bypass the way of the cross.

The Transfiguration is only to be understood in the context of the greater glory of the Resurrection which still awaits the Passion of Christ.

4. Learning about worship

In recent initiatives towards the renewal of worship it is often remarked that one thing that is too often lacking is a full enough understanding about the nature of worship on the part of those who worship. A need commonly identified is for 'formation' or 'liturgical formation' so that people become 'shaped' as worshippers. This is not a subject we often address in our preaching, perhaps making the assumption that this is 'something that comes naturally'. Yet it is not, in the end, the cleverness of our worship ideas or skill in writing liturgies that enables people to worship fully, but what they bring themselves in knowledge, imagination, and expectation. The Old Testament reading may give us a cue for considering some elements of worship, in which case the Transfiguration narrative itself might be otherwise expressed in prayer and song.

The sermon might proceed along these lines:
1. Although worship is a basic human instinct, its proper expression can be dampened by other pressures. Most people do not easily 'slip into' worshipping when the service begins. Worship is demanding and requires preparation, and also understanding.

2. Over the centuries, the church has developed shapes, patterns and formulae which serve to guide us into worship. In the Exodus passage we can see a structure which, although not immediately transferable to our situations, supports the experience of God that the people are about to have. The common shape of worship moves through Gathering, the Word of God, Responding to the Word – which might lead to one of the sacraments, ending with Dismissal. This and other 'traditional' shapes can of course be clothed in many different ways and styles, and the underlying 'drama' may be felt unconsciously rather than recognised.

3. (When preaching in a Church of Scotland or other context in the Reformed tradition) In our tradition there is freedom from set texts and room for spontaneity. What the General Assembly does in regard to books of services from its appointed committees is 'commend' them for use in the church, books of orders clothed in model texts, combinations that are deemed more likely to enable worship that is true to the Word of God, pastorally sensitive, inclusive, passionate, and contextualised.

4. The words, song, gesture, and ritual actions in which the shape is 'clothed' are not the worship itself. They have to be carefully worked at so that they are 'transparent', so that people may address God but simultaneously be addressed by God. Worship happens at a deeper level than our liturgies; it is a spiritual encounter with God.

5. Worship does not 'belong' to those who lead it, while others follow. It is fully participative by all present, in which different roles contribute to the overall experience.

6. As Exodus and our Psalm suggest, the coming of God in Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit to the worshippers is not for a private group of initiates but always a public occasion. Thus we plan worship that is open and inclusive.

It is recognised that this is not a complete list, and also that any one of these points may have a sermon to itself.
**Time with Children**

Ask what is the highest point in this church? (Gallery, pulpit, tower)

*Let one or two of the children go or be taken to one of these places. When they are up there ask:*

What does it feel like to be up so high?

*As they return, ask the others:*

Have you ever been anywhere that is higher? Have you ever climbed a mountain?

What does it feels like?

Tell of the day the disciples Peter, James and John went up a mountain with Jesus and heard God speak. It was a wonderful experience for them and they wanted it to go on for ever. So they said, let us build bothies, so that we can stay here for ever...

*Ask those who went to the pulpit, gallery etc:*

When you came down from the (pulpit) and the (gallery) what did you feel? (Not so special? Ordinary? Boring even?)

Do you ever have such a good time, or go to such a good place, that you want it to last for ever?

And then when it was all over, did you feel disappointed?

Close by explaining that Jesus and the disciples had to come down from the mountain and back to ordinary life, and how the extraordinary and memorable events can help us to see how special even ordinary life can be.
Prayers

Upon a high mountain,
O God of majestic glory,
you revealed Jesus
in the mystery of his transfiguration
as your Chosen One
to whom we must listen.
In this act of worship
may he be revealed to us
in the message of the prophets
and the witness of the apostles,
that we may hear his voice
and receive him in faith.

Merciful God,
it is good for us to be here,
but we also tremble and recoil
as did the disciples on the mountain.
For we have not lived gloriously,
nor listened to the One
who bids us take up our cross
and live the costly life of faith.
We have prostrated ourselves
before the false brightness of lesser lights,
which blazon their false claims
of truth, or fulfilment, or hope.
Humbly we ask for your forgiveness.

Absolution is declared or assurance of forgiveness given
Collect (from Common Order for this day)

Almighty Father,
whose Son was revealed in majesty
before he suffered death upon the cross;
give us grace to perceive his glory,
that we may be strengthened to suffer with him
and be changed into his likeness, from glory to glory;
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

In addition to the above prayers, prepared by our contributor, other prayers may be found in People of the Way which is the theme for this year’s Pray Now. It was also the theme for Heart and Soul 2016. People of the Way is available from St Andrew Press.

Musical Suggestions

CH4 353  Bright the cloud and bright the glory. The hymn captures the awesome nature of the event and develops some of the issues and resonances in the gospel passage. The tune, by American Presbyterian organist Alfred Fedak, means ‘terrible / awe-inspiring light’ and could almost have been written for this hymn – and perhaps it was. There is no other tune that fits well enough due to the irregular seventh line.

CH4 355  You, Lord, are both Lamb and Shepherd. The Transfiguration gives this contemporary Canadian writer the beginning of her second verse. It is set to ‘Triumph’ – an old favourite rescued from oblivion in CH4.

CH4 448  Shine, Jesus, shine. The spirit of this passage is reflected in this well-known worship song, especially its third verse.
CH4 512  To God be the glory. The mission-hall favourite reflects the theme of glory on the mountain.

CH4 519  Love divine. The classic Wesley hymn, where in the last verse the phrase ‘changed from glory into glory' resonates with this story.

CH4 578  Christ, whose glory fills the skies. The themes of glory, light and radiance are to the fore throughout this fine Wesley hymn.

CH4 784  Come light. A short song which goes well with the theme.

Tomorrow, 27th, is the day the Church remembers the poet George Herbert, some of whose poems were set to music. Two are

CH4 122  Let all the world in every corner sing

CH4 579  Come my Way, my Truth, my Life

Psalm 2

In the Scottish Psalter it was not included among the psalms 'most suitable for use in public worship'. There is no version of Psalm 2 in CH4 but the following hymn refers to it.

CH4 119  O God, thou art the Father St Columba may have had in mind v.6 of the psalm when in his second verse he speaks of God reigning 'high in the heavenly Zion'. The same verse beautifully uses the image of light to describe God's nature and dwelling.
Additional Resources

Resourcing Mission

Resourcing Mission is host to Starters for Sunday and other key mission resources for download and purchase. Online booking is available for Mission & Discipleship events. Please check back regularly, as new items are being added all the time. If there is something you’d like to see on this new site, please contact us via the website.

Prayer Resources

These materials are designed to be a starting point for what you might look for in prayers. People of the Way is available from St Andrew Press.

Music Resources

The hymns mentioned in this material are ideas of specific hymns you might choose for this week’s themes. However, for some excellent articles on church music and ideas for new music resources, please check out our online music pages Different Voices.

Preaching Resources

These materials are designed to be a starting point for what you might preach this Sunday. Preachers Perspectives is a resource where we have asked twelve preachers to share the insights they have gathered through their experiences of writing and delivering sermons regularly.

Scots Worship Resources

The Kirk's Ear - Scots i the Kirk series for Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, Pentecost and other times of the year
Wurship Ouk bi Ouk - Metrical psalms, hymns, prayers and words for worship
Scots Sacraments may give you helpful material if you are celebrating Communion or have a Baptism.

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to express its thanks to the Rev Dr Douglas Galbraith for providing us with this Sunday’s material.

Please note that the views expressed in these materials are those of the individual writer and not necessarily the official view of the Church of Scotland, which can be laid down only by the General Assembly.