

## Transfiguration Sunday – Year A

### Transfiguration Sunday – 19 February 2023

The Faith Nurture Forum would like to thank Matt Ward and Rev Dr Douglas Galbraith for the use of extracts from their archive material (from 2020 and 2017) for Transfiguration Sunday.

Weekly Worship, based on the Revised Common Lectionary, is for everyone – in any capacity – who is involved in creating and leading worship.

It provides liturgical material that can be used for worship in all settings. Our writers are asked to share their approaches to creating and delivering this material to equip leaders with a greater confidence and ability to reflect on their own worship practice and experience and encourage them to consider how this material might be adapted for their own context.

An archive of resources for daily worship can be found on the Sanctuary First website:

<https://www.sanctuaryfirst.org.uk/daily-worship>

We would encourage continual reflection on the changing patterns of worship and spiritual practice that are emerging from disruption and how this might help identify pathways towards development and worship renewal.

We may not all be gathered in the same building, but at this time, when we need each other so much, we are invited to worship together, from where we are – knowing that God can hear us all and can blend even distant voices into one song of worship.

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## 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.

Any approach to unpacking the readings and preparing the sermon involves time. A first reading can help to connect with the themes, to begin to see images and ideas that link them (there are the obvious things and then the small details, for example 'six days' appears in both the Exodus and Matthew readings) and to allow ideas to begin to surface. A second reading identifies things that puzzle or surprise about the texts. This might lead to some reading of commentaries. There is a lot of other rich material around the Transfiguration, particularly poetry and art. It is worth spending a bit of time exploring some of that, and again making connections between themes and ideas.

Equipped with those insights from both biblical scholarship and wider resources, it is then the key work of prayerful reading and reflection that allow ideas to surface.

## [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.

This is perhaps the obvious reading to pair with the Gospel, with themes that link both. Both are set on mountains; both involve the prophet and lawgiver of Israel; both have something to do with encounters with God; both have some form of divine revelation; both have importance for the people of God.

This section of the book of Exodus is some of the oldest material in the Hebrew Bible. It forms part of what is known as the ‘Holiness Code’ (chapters 21-24), which scholars suggest is a collection of traditions spanning a 1,000-year period.

At the heart of this passage is the question, ‘who can worship God in God’s most sacred place?’ In looking at that question it is important to read the whole of the chapter. When we do that we find the simple answer: Moses. Despite setting out with Aaron, Nadab, Abihu and several other elders, Moses is told by YHWH; “You alone [Moses], and none of the others, are to come near me. The people are not even to come up the mountain.” (v2)

However, the whole group heads up the mountain (v9) and they all see the God of Israel. This is a really rare occurrence in the Hebrew Bible. It is amazing. They all survive to speak of it (v11): “God did not lay a hand on the chief men of the people of Israel, yet they beheld God, and ate and drank.” This is the first recorded divine picnic!

In this passage, Moses alone is called up the mountain. Yet he takes with him Joshua. He leaves Aaron and Hur in charge (with the fateful words, “Whoever has a dispute can go to them”, eventually leading to their making the golden calf in chapter 32).

One of the striking things for me about the passage is that meeting God requires time – this is not an instant download; there is a lot of waiting around – it is six days before God calls to Moses out of the cloud. Moses enters the cloud and is there for 40 days (biblical shorthand for ‘a long time’). Too often we are expecting everything to happen instantaneously.

What is distinctly different to a few verses earlier is that Moses *does not see* God, rather he sees the ‘glory of God’.

The description of God’s glory to our modern eyes doesn’t seem that extraordinary. We are used to seeing the incredible both in the natural world – the explosion of a volcano, the

power of a glacier, and in the world we create – the power of a rocket blasting to space, the dreadful destruction of long-range missiles laying waste to a whole town. We have become so numbed to these things that I am not entirely sure we would tremble at the sight of God's awesome majesty. Sadly we have lost the sense of awe. In a world where 'awesome power' describes a rugby performance, 'awesome beauty' a designer dress and 'oh my God' is just an utterly trivial 'OMG' in a text message, we somehow need to recapture the wonder of encountering God.

## Psalm 2

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 the 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 not as 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.

Some psalms have phrases that are deeply familiar. This is one of those psalms. Those of you familiar with Handel's Messiah will now have an ear worm that you'll be humming all day. It is not just Handel who takes phrases from this Psalm – references to it are scattered through the New Testament (Acts 4:25-28, 1 Cor 1:20).

Coming right at the opening of the Psalter, the pitch is made that this is about more than just the reign of David and the Kings of Israel. It is almost certainly a psalm for a human coronation. It of course points to an understanding of David's reign being on behalf of God – the divine right of kings being echoed through history even until now ('Dieu et mon droit' appears on the royal coat of arms), but it is about much more than claiming the right to governance in a small region of the Middle East.

There is an emphasis on the double title, 'the Lord's anointed' – anointed being the word that comes to us ultimately as 'Messiah' and 'Christ'.

Verse 7 is the golden thread that connects this psalm to the other lectionary readings. "You are my son", (Matt 17:5, 2 Peter 1:17). These phrases have strong echoes of the accounts of Jesus' baptism as well as the Transfiguration. Inevitably as we read the psalm we do so

through our Christological lens of it being a statement from God about who Jesus is. When we do that the psalm points us towards the kingly rule of Christ, the suffering servant soon to be enthroned upon the cross (and for the musically minded, you might now have another ear worm from Stainer's 'The Crucifixion').

## [2 Peter 1:16-21](#)

Peter was there! He heard the voice from heaven.

It was a pronouncement for the benefit of Peter, James and John, and ultimately for us. It is a pronouncement that affirms God was in Christ being revealed to the world.

The account that is given of the Transfiguration here neatly skips over Peter's bumbling offer to build some shacks for those there. In the context of this letter it clearly builds a case for the authority of the author (which is unlikely to be Peter himself as the somewhat self-conscious writer suggests, "We have not to depend on made-up stories..." (v16, Good News Translation). In fact the only real purpose of recounting the story here appears to be in strengthening the author's authority and with it the wider message of the letter).

The need for such authority in the writing of the letter becomes clear in the following chapter – some of those who were teaching were misusing scripture. The divine proclamation, "This is my own dear Son" (v17), underlines the importance of God's word revealed to us in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. We need to heed the words of v19 and pay attention to God's word proclaimed. It is the dazzling light shining in the darkest of places.

The writer urges their readers to go behind these teachings to the person and work of Jesus Christ himself. He appeals to the account of the Transfiguration, with the writer 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 (vv20-21), taught by these witnesses to divine revelation.

## [Matthew 17:1-9](#)

As always, Jesus is deliberate in what He does. He takes His disciples away (a useful reminder of the need for all of us in ministry to take time away to be with God).

Having gone away, we move straight into the main action and we encounter the strange word, transfigured. Transfigured means ‘transformed’ or ‘changed’ (cf. Rom 12:2, 2 Cor 3:18), the Good News Bible helpfully translates this as “a change came over Jesus”. What it actually means is made clear – “his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.”

The two other figures are interpreted as Moses and Elijah (how do they know it is them?). Their presence makes the links between the fulfilling of the Law (cf. Moses hears the voice from God on the mountain) and the prophets (the expectation that the Messiah’s appearance will be preceded by the return of Elijah – cf. Malachi 4:5-6). Both Moses and Elijah are those who have conversed with God. Now we discover them doing the same with Jesus – another gentle pointer to His divinity.

The offer to build some shelters is puzzling. I am not sure that it would be a natural reaction, but then in moments of stress we all act differently. I read it as an attempt at some sort of hospitality and an attempt to keep them all there longer.

Peter is interrupted by the voice from heaven and the words – “my beloved Son”. The disciples are full of fear at hearing the voice of God and are warned not to tell anyone about the experience, but for Matthew’s readers this is not new – they are already in on the Messianic secret and this is another reinforcement of what they have already heard at Jesus’ baptism (Matt 3:13-17).

## Sermon ideas

Those who have visited Coventry Cathedral will be aware of the story of its rebuilding in the aftermath of war-time bombing. Standing in what remains of the medieval ruins you can see into the new section of the Cathedral. Through the great glass screen you can glimpse the extraordinary tapestry of Christ in Glory at the far end of the cathedral. From the midst of the pain and struggle of apparent ruin there is the reminder of the ultimate victory of Christ.

The transfiguration gospel offers a similar glimpse as the shadow of the cross becomes increasingly dark as it falls across Jesus and the disciples’ path (and indeed our own journey through Lent). The disciples have moved from the excitement of hearing their master’s radical teaching to witnessing His life-changing and love-affirming miracles, to being plunged into deep confusion as Jesus reveals He will suffer. Now they are overwhelmed by the merest glimpse of His true glory.

In a world that feels increasingly fragile it is all too easy to live with the sense of deep darkness over us. Yet in the words of poet Malcolm Guite, “Nor can this blackened sky, this darkened scar eclipse that glimpse of how things really are.” (Guite: ‘Transfiguration’ in *Sounding the Seasons*, Canterbury Press.)

Even as we journey through Lent towards the pain of Good Friday, we are reminded of the ultimate victory of God.

The challenge for us is how we help those beyond the doors of our church to catch a glimpse of how things really are.

### **Other approaches to the text:**

A Bible story can often be something that we are familiar with, or at least think we are. In a culture where literacy is highly prized we forget that the biblical texts come from an oral tradition, they were stories memorised and shared. Encouraging a community to tell the story from memory can be a great way of engaging with the text. For this text a simple prompt such as, ‘there’s a story where Jesus went up a mountain with three disciples and met with some other people – can you remember and tell the story?’ should be enough to get people racking their brains as they try to piece things together. It is instructive to discover which details we have remembered and which we have forgotten, or to see where we have changed the order of events. It helps build an appreciation for the detail of a narrative, it encourages questions about why those details were important and often leads to deep insights and prayer. (For more detailed ideas and discussion about ‘Remembered Bible,’ see Janet Lees’ book, ‘Word of Mouth: Using the Remembered Bible for Building Community’.)

Art can also help us to engage with Biblical narratives in new ways, just as an artist meditates upon aspects of the story that have connected with them. Offering a collection of images of the same story and getting people to talk about what they see can open conversation, reflection and prayer. See, for example [the Vanderbilt digital library](#).

### **Other things to consider/talk about:**

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. God becoming human 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.

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, 6 August, 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)

### **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.

## Prayers

Are there words or phrases from the readings that connect with the things that I want to express to God?

For the prayer of approach I took inspiration from phrases in Malcom Guite's poem 'Transfiguration'. I find poetry can be very helpful for my own prayer life, often offering well-crafted thoughts that express what I stumble to say. Those phrases often work as well in public worship as in private devotion.

### Approach to God

For this opening prayer I have taken some of the phrases from Malcolm Guite's poem 'Transfiguration' as inspiration. You could use the whole poem at the beginning or end of the prayer.

Lord as we gather here in this place and this time, a place familiar,  
a time set in our calendars,  
we thank You that we are here to meet with You afresh.

May this gathering today be a time and space when we find a moment 'in and out of time'.  
A moment of meeting with You  
when the daily veil that at times covers our world and our lives  
is removed and we see Your glory.

Glory revealed in the beauty of the universe You have created,  
beauty revealed in the community we are part of,  
beauty revealed to us in Your precious word,  
most of all, beauty revealed in the love of Your Son, Jesus Christ.

Help us again today to come away with You to a quiet place,  
to meet with You in new ways,  
ways that help us glimpse how things really are

when we truly come into Your presence,  
when we truly allow Your light to transform us  
and the whole world.

### **Collect**

Transfiguring God,  
before Your Son suffered on the cross  
You revealed His true glory on the holy mountain:  
As we now, by faith, behold the light of His face and glimpse His glory  
may we be strengthened to bear the cross,  
and that we may reflect His glory to the world around;  
through the same Jesus Christ  
who is alive and reigns with You,  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever.

### **Prayer of confession**

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 Christ 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.

### **Musical suggestions**

Our [online music resource](#) is on the Church of Scotland website; you can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4) and download a selection of recordings for use in worship. You will also find playlists for this week and liturgical seasons and themes on the *Weekly Worship* and *Inspire Me* tabs.

You can find further musical suggestions for this week in a range of styles on the [Songs for Sunday blog](#) from Trinity College Glasgow.

The Scottish Psalter did not include Psalm 2 among those ‘most suitable for use in public worship’. There is no version of it in CH4, but CH4 119 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.
- CH4 122 – “Let all the world in every corner sing”

- 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 356 – “Meekness and Majesty” – Picks up on themes from the 2 Peter reading
- CH4 448 – “Shine, Jesus, shine” – The spirit of this passage is reflected in this well-known worship song, especially its third verse
- CH4 474 – “Hail to the Lord’s anointed, great David’s greater Son”
- 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 542 – “Lord speak to me, that I may speak in living echoes of thy tone”
- 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 579 – “Come my Way, my Truth, my Life”
- CH4 784 – “Come light” – A short song which goes well with the theme.
- Complete Mission Praise 1012 – “These are the days of Elijah”  
<https://songselect.ccli.com/Songs/1537904/days-of-elijah>
- “Wondrous sight! O vision fair of glory that the church shall share, which Christ upon the mountain shows, where brighter than the sun he glows!” – This hymn (not in CH4 but widely available) recounts the story of the transfiguration in hymn form  
[https://hymnary.org/text/o\\_wondrous\\_type\\_o\\_vision\\_fair](https://hymnary.org/text/o_wondrous_type_o_vision_fair)

- “Transfiguration” (Hillsong)  
<https://songselect.ccli.com/Songs/7047252/transfiguration>
- “How great is our God” (Chris Tomlin)  
<https://songselect.ccli.com/Songs/4348399/how-great-is-our-god>

## Reflecting on our worship practice

Since the start of the pandemic in 2020, the way we worship has changed and we need to reflect on the changing or newly established patterns that emerged and continue to emerge as a result of the disruption.

We can facilitate worship for all by exploring imaginative approaches to inclusion, participation and our use of technologies in ways that suit our contexts. This is not an exhaustive list, but some things we could consider are:

- Framing various parts of the worship service in accessible language to help worshippers understand the character and purpose of each part. This is essential for creating worship for all (intergenerational worship) that reflects your community of faith.
- Holding spaces for reflection and encouraging prayer to be articulated in verbal and non-verbal ways, individually and in online breakout rooms.
- In online formats the effective use of the chat function and microphone settings encourages active participation in prayer, e.g. saying the Lord’s Prayer together unmuted, in a moment of ‘holy chaos’.
- While singing in our congregations is still restricted, we can worship corporately by using antiphonal psalm readings, creeds and participative prayers.
- Using music and the arts as part of the worship encourages the use of imagination in place of sung or spoken words.
- Use of silence, sensory and kinaesthetic practices allow for experience and expression beyond regular audio and visual mediums.

The following questions might help you develop a habit of reflecting on how we create and deliver content and its effectiveness and impact, and then applying what we learn to develop our practice.

- How inclusive was the worship?

Could the worship delivery and content be described as worship for all/  
intergenerational? Was it sensitive to different “Spiritual Styles”?

- How was the balance between passive and active participation?
- How were people empowered to connect with or encounter God?  
What helped this? What hindered this?
- How cohesive was the worship?  
Did it function well as a whole?  
How effective was each of the individual elements in fulfilling its purpose?
- How balanced was the worship?  
What themes/topics/doctrines/areas of Christian life were included?
- How did the worship connect with your context/contemporary issues?  
Was it relevant in the everyday lives of those attending and in the wider parish/  
community?  
How well did the worship connect with local and national issues?  
How well did the worship connect with world events/issues?
- What have I learned that can help me next time I plan and deliver worship?

## Useful links

Up to date information for churches around Covid-19 can be found [here](#)

You can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4) and download a selection of recordings for use in worship [here](#)

You can find an introduction to spiritual styles online [here](#)

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