

**Prelude:** Final movement of Mendelsohn's 6<sup>th</sup> Organ Sonata played by Alan Buchan on the St. Bride's organ

**Words of welcome:**

In our worship today we will be thinking about the glory of God. This is a vast and impossible thing for us to get our heads around, but even trying to think about it can only be good, and when we think about it in relation to Jesus then we may get a glimmer of insight. So let's begin by singing or listening to the hymn

**Hymn:** Christ whose glory fills the skies

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus, born in humble circumstances and born as one of us, we thank you that you know about ordinary days, and dreary days and the tedium that life can sometimes present to us; and we thank you that when we bring our days to you, the good, the bad, the ordinary, you touch them and us with the glory of God.

We praise you that you are the embodiment of God's presence, and that you have promised that presence to be with us always. We thank you that you will never leave us and that your steadfast love is eternal. So forgive us when we think of any day as ordinary, since we live all of them with our extraordinary Lord.

In our worship today, and in our prayers, in our living this week and in our waiting for things in life to change, we pray that we may be reminded of the glory of your presence.

And hear us as we pray as Jesus taught us, saying:

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 debts as we forgive our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

For Thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory for ever. Amen.

**Reading:** Mark 9:2-13

**Hymn:** You, Lord are both lamb and shepherd

The story of the transfiguration of Jesus is one which we read and wonder at – but for the most part we do not understand. That puts us in good company as the three disciples who witnessed the event were filled with wonder but far from understanding what they were seeing. And they had the advantage of us: they were Jews of the first century. To get even a glimpse of what was going on on that mountain you have to think yourself back into the mind-set of a first century Jew.

As a first century Jew you are, as we said a couple of weeks ago, on tiptoe of expectation that the Messiah will come soon. Many of the prophetic signs are in place and your hope, sometimes your hope against hope, is that the Messiah will come soon and fight for your freedom. That is one strand of your thought, or your expectation.

But also as a first century Jew you are longing and waiting for the presence of God to return to the nation, and, especially to the temple. The temple, and especially the holy-of-holies, the inner sanctum, was believed to be the place where God's glory dwelt. It was where the presence of God was to be found on earth. It was the place where heaven and earth met. But the glorious presence of God had departed at the time of the exile. Since the exile, the temple has been re-built, it has been desecrated by invading forces and has been cleansed and re-dedicated – that is what is celebrated still during the feast of Hannukah. Even in

Jesus' life-time the temple was undergoing an upgrade, paid for by King Herod's family, who were very well aware that historically there was a close connection between the rightful royal house and the fortunes of the temple. But the people knew that the glory of God had departed from the temple, and was yet to return. They had an account of that departure given by that visionary prophet, Ezekiel.

**Reading:** Ezekiel 10:18-19, 11:22-25

Ezekiel is a very visual prophet. He doesn't just speak words to the people but he gives them pictures and sometimes little dramas to illustrate his message. Some of these visuals are very strange, but then they would have to be, because he is trying to describe the indescribable presence and throne of God. So in this vision, he sees the glory of God, the very presence of God himself come out from the temple; it hovered over the east gate of the temple courtyard for a moment, while Ezekiel spoke words of condemnation to officials who had colluded with the Babylonians in the sack of the city (that is the part we did not read today) and then it left the city altogether. God has left the place where heaven and earth met, and still in the first century people were longing for the presence and glory of God to return. So as a first century Jew you are waiting for God's Messiah to come and deliver you and you are waiting for the return of God's presence, God's glory, to the temple. And to you, these are two separate things, not two aspects of the same thing.

Only Jesus has made the connection with the coming of the Messiah and the return of God's presence. This connection was made for him at his baptism, when the Spirit of God came down on him like a dove and a voice from heaven acclaimed him as God's beloved Son. That had been a sign for Jesus himself, which sent him off to the wilderness to fast and pray and work out what God's programme for the Messiah might be – as opposed to the human expectations.

And now we read of him on a mountain, transfigured, shining, and dazzling with an unearthly brightness. The glory of God has returned to his people, but it has not returned to the temple building but to a person, to the one who has acknowledged that he is God's Messiah. This is not chiefly a proof of Jesus' divinity – that's almost a side-effect, if you like. It is a sign that the new reality of God's kingdom is beginning, and it is beginning here, where God's glory has come down, where, as previously in the temple, heaven and earth meet, where God's reality and the world intersect. In Jesus. Jesus is the new temple, the place where God is to be found on earth.

The disciples are gob-smacked and don't know how to respond. A week before this Jesus had asked them who they thought he was, and Peter had named him Messiah. But he had not imagined anything like this: he had not imagined that the Messiah would in fact embody the return of the glory of God – how could he?

Moses and Elijah came with him. On one level they stood for the law and the prophets, fulfilled in Jesus, and show that both are in fact leading to his coming. But on another level something else is going on. Moses was the one who used to meet with God face to face in the inner tabernacle, and when he came out his face shone with the reflected glory of God so that he had to be veiled as he was too bright to look on. Elijah was the one who did not have a normal death but was caught up in God's glory and taken from his disciple Elisha. These are the two who knew the glory of God personally – and they come with God's glory which is given to Jesus. They come and the voice from the cloud says that it is not to them but to Jesus that we should listen.

We could leave it there, but to do so would be to ignore the instruction from the cloud. We should listen to Jesus. And what is it that Jesus wants to talk about as they walk down the

hill? He wants to talk about his rising from the dead – which of course means that first he will have to die. The disciples are puzzled and remember that the prophet Malachi had said that Elijah would come before the Messiah appeared – and here they had just seen Elijah, so was this what he was talking about?

But Jesus will not be deflected. They and we have to understand what his purpose is. Elijah is coming – or you could translate the words, has come – to restore all things. Maybe the disciples remembered here that in another context Jesus had likened John the Baptist to Elijah. But what is more important to Jesus is what is written about the Son of man: and it is worth reflecting that that phrase son of man is found in Daniel's prophecies as a figure who embodies the glory of God. Jesus conflates Daniel's words with Isaiah's imagery of God's suffering servant and tells that he will suffer many things and be treated with contempt. Just as the powers of the world have already treated "Elijah".

In this season of Lent we remember that we walk with Jesus on the road to the cross. The cross is not a mistake or an unfortunate occurrence because the Messianic return of God went wrong. The cross is how the glory of God will be seen, how the victory of God will be assured, how the freedom of God's people will be won. And although the cross was a one-off event which changes the world forever, it is also the way by which we, as Jesus' disciples, are called on to help spread the reign and rules, the values and love of the kingdom of God in the world. God's kingdom is not taken forward by force, or by decree. It is not taken forward by the powerful, the rich, those whom the world esteems. It is taken forward by the poor in spirit, by the meek, by the peace-makers, by those who mourn, by those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. It is taken forward by you and by me as we live with the humility of God's children; as we are prepared to align ourselves with those who suffer, because we are God's children; as we deny our own desires and interests so that we may live the life of Jesus' followers.

### **Hymn:** Son of God eternal Saviour

As we come to prayer, remember that as God's glory resides in Jesus, as he is the one in whom earth and heaven meet, so when we come to him in prayer we are standing in the courts of heaven itself – when we come as a church as we do now, or when we come in our own daily prayers. Any time we turn to God in prayer we enter the courts of heaven even while our feet are still planted firmly on the earth!

### **Prayer**

Lord God, we come to you with awe, remembering that your glory lives in Jesus and that when we come to you in his name, we are coming into the courts of heaven.

Heavenly Father, in whom all glory resides, and who shows us the wonder of your glory which is the wonder of who you are in everything you do and make, we bow before you with gratitude, and awe and we would do as you have said and listen to Jesus.

Help us to hear him, when he speaks of his path of suffering. Help us to hear and to understand, to be glad, though humbled, that his sufferings are for us and all the world, and to remember that since we are called to follow him, that suffering may be part of our following. We pray for those who are our brothers and sisters in you, and who suffer for their faith. We pray for those who suffer discrimination, and abuse and persecution and loss, asking that in everything they might know your presence.

Help us to hear Jesus when he speaks words of love to those who society might overlook. Make us those who follow him in seeing the people you put in our path, and seeing them with your eyes. Remind us that there is no one we can see who is not made in your image and loved by you, no one for whom Jesus did not suffer. And make our care and love as real and practical as that which Jesus showed.

Help us to hear Jesus when he speaks of your kingdom, and remind us that it is a kingdom of love and self-sacrifice, not of worldly power. We pray today for those who govern us, elected officials, asking that you be the one to lead and guide them as decisions are made. We pray for those who might find power hard to handle one way or another, that they would remember that they are servants, not kings. And help your church to show the watching world how you handle power and authority.

Hear our prayers, Lord God, and teach us in our lives to reflect your glory.  
In Jesus' name, Amen

Our closing hymn is one which calls us, listening to Jesus, to follow him. It is one you know well, but maybe not to this lively tune!

**Hymn** Jesus calls us o'er the tumult

**Benediction**

Living in God's kingdom, touched by God's glory, may you know God's presence.  
And the blessing of God Almighty,  
Father, Son and Holy Spirit  
Be with you now and always, Amen.

**Postlude** An older version of the Songs of Praise theme tune, written by Howard Goodall and played by John Crombie