

ORPHIR and STENNESS CHURCH
Sunday 19th February 2023; Transfiguration, Year A
Morning Service 1100
Transcript

Welcome and Intimations

Good morning. Good to see you.

I have something to add to the intimations ...

Yesterday, 18th February: seven years ago yesterday a consultant in the Balfour told me that I have aggressive cancer in my spine, spread from a primary in my lung. The consultant oncologist in Aberdeen later told me that average survival is 3 years from diagnosis, but she had patients at 8 years. Seven years. During all that time I have had enormous support, not least from your good selves. Thank you. Now I have a record to beat!

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Wherever you come from today, whether you come regularly, or occasionally, perhaps even for the first time, you are welcome to our worship. Your presence enriches us in this time of celebration together.

Today we think about what we know as the transfiguration of Jesus, and its effect on those who witnessed it.

Let us take a moment to be quiet and know the presence of God among us.

Pause

Call to Worship:

Praise the Lord our God, and worship at his holy mountain, because the Lord our God is holy.
(Ps. 99)

Let us worship God:

1st. Hymn 474 Hail to the Lord's anointed, great David's greater Son

First Prayer and Lord's Prayer

Let us pray:

We glimpse the glory of God in the night skies;
over land and sea, coast and island, we see his handiwork.
Yet much, much more, we see his glory in Christ Jesus, transfigured by his light,
and glorious in his final suffering, his death and resurrection.

May he rescue our worship from any self-serving sentimentality,
and confront us with the Christ who brings disciples trembling to their knees;
the Christ who awakens unanswerable questions and uninhibited adoration,
for in him is the true light and the power and the glory, for ever.
May the Spirit of God continue to dwell in us, and transfigure us with the light of Christ Jesus.
May we serve him well, even when we don't see things clearly,
doing the most important things humbly,
the boring things gladly, the exciting things carefully,
the humble things lovingly,
and the risky things with discernment and courage.

So may we make each day be a worthy paragraph in the story of Christ's transfiguration story.
In his name we pray, and we sum up our prayers in the words that he has taught us:

*Our Father which 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.

Readings: Anne will read for us today:

Exodus 24:12-18; (NRSVA).

On the Mountain with God

The Lord said to Moses, 'Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.' So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. To the elders he had said, 'Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them.'

Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

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2 Peter 1:16-21: (NRSVA).

Eyewitnesses of Christ's Glory

For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honour and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, 'This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.' We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.

So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.
Amen.

2nd. Hymn 356 Meekness and Majesty

Gospel Reading:

Matthew 17:1-9 (NRSVA)

The Transfiguration

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!' When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Get up and do not be afraid.' And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, 'Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.'

Message:

Matthew 17:2-5:

And [Jesus] was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!'

You may have noticed that I am using the same Readings as Andy used last week. I follow the Revised Common Lectionary, and I think he uses a different scheme, so it may be that we may use the same readings on successive weeks, but we usually look at different aspects.

That day up on the mountain? What really happened? A transformed, radiant Jesus; three stunned disciples, a shining cloud, Moses and Elijah, an awesome voice from the heavens. A vision? A hallucination? A stunt of some kind?

These are the kind of questions people might ask in our place and our time. If TV cameras and recorders had been available all that time ago, there would have been mobs of reporters demanding interviews with Peter, James and John; lots of suggestions and theories from the experts – scientists, psychiatrists, philosophers, theologians, astrologers, psychic mediums, and all the rest. But they didn't have these things.

The only information we have about what happened on that day comes from Matthew, Mark and Luke, all telling the same story, with some variations according to the style and emphasis of each author, plus one brief reference in the Second Letter of Peter.

Each Gospel includes the mountain retreat, Jesus with Peter, James and John, the time of prayer, the radiance that transfigures Jesus, Moses and Elijah, the luminous cloud, the Heavenly Voice, the disciples flat on their faces. That's all the description we have. That's how the first Christians heard and retold the story, the story that was still circulating during the second half of the first century A.D. It's impossible for us to go back further than that, it's pointless to try.

This is a *faith story*, a story treasured, retold again and again, among the early believers because it helped demonstrate, in vivid pictorial form, the answer they had found to one critical question: *Who is Jesus?* Why should we take any notice of him? A key question for them, and a crucial question for us today, a question not for intellectual debate or pointless argument, but a question that each one of us needs to face, and continue to face.

The Gospel writers were trying to convey, to emphasise, their conviction that this Jesus was unique: the Word made flesh, come to live among us. In him was present the fullness of the Essence of God. Their message, our continuing message, is: listen to him, learn from him, commit yourself to him. If you will do that, then, in the relationship that follows, you learn for yourself who this Jesus of Nazareth really is.

Today is Transfiguration Sunday, the last Sunday of Epiphany. Next Sunday is the first of Lent. My dictionary defines Epiphany as '*the manifestation of a supernatural or divine reality, or any moment of great or sudden revelation*'. The transfiguration story is an epiphany; a story about the unveiling of God amongst us: about seeing the light of God shining in the face of Jesus Christ.

The transfiguration story reminds us of our Exodus reading, and of the story told later by that hot-tempered man named Saul of Tarsus. On his way from Jerusalem to Damascus to persecute those disgusting heretics called Christians, suddenly he was enveloped in a blinding light from heaven. When he asked the question: "Who are you Lord?" the voice replied: "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." Saul's epiphany story: Saul's revelation.

We treasure that moment of truth for Peter, James and John. Perhaps it reminds us of special experiences, times when we, in our own modest way, experience something of an epiphany, moments when we too may have sensed the glory of God in Jesus. Maybe you know what I mean.

The 20th. Century Trappist Monk, Thomas Merton, wrote:

"Life is this simple. We are living in a world that is absolutely transparent, and God is shining through it all the time. This is not just a fable or a nice story. It is true. If we abandon ourselves to God, and forget ourselves, we see it sometimes, and we see it maybe frequently. God shows Himself everywhere, in everything – in people and in things and in nature and in events. It becomes very evident that God is everywhere and in everything and we cannot be without him. It's impossible. The only thing is that we don't see it."

But, as Marcus Borg says:

"Occasionally we do 'see it', do experience God shining through everything. 'Thin places' are places where these two levels of reality meet or intersect ... places where the veil momentarily lifts, and we behold God, experience the one in whom we live, all around us and within us".

'The God in whom we live and move and have our being' that Paul talks about.

Maybe it would make believing easier for us all if only we too could glimpse Jesus in unexpected and miraculous ways. Some people do claim a "mountaintop experience", with thunder and lightning, and God appearing before their eyes. More likely, the experience comes in quietness, with an overwhelming sense of the presence of something far beyond our experience. For a few people, such moments of spiritual clarity are large and frequent, but for most of us they are small and brief and occasional.

Some people find God in lonely places along the shore, or in woods, or in a well-loved building: the "thin places". Some meet God in other people – customers, clients, patients, fellow-workers, perhaps even in a cheerful word from a passing stranger. The important thing is to be open to that light, open to the presence of Jesus in our everyday lives.

Yet it can be very difficult to recognise God at work in ordinary life, especially at the present time when there is so much trouble and tragedy in so many places, from political shenanigans in high places to the senseless murder of teenagers in city streets to the devastation and loss of life in the earthquakes in Turkey and Syria, to the wars in Ukraine and elsewhere.

We have to hang on to our conviction that God is there, though clearly he does not intervene to protect us from such disasters. Here is the paradox: a God of love who seems to allow, or tolerate, such human suffering, a subject that has occupied countless scholars.

In his book *'The Problem of Pain'*, C. S. Lewis argues that human and animal pain are not sufficient reasons to reject belief in a good and powerful God.

With Marcus Borg, *"I cannot believe that God could have stopped the Holocaust but chose not to, just as I cannot believe that God responds to some prayers for healing and protection but not others. I don't think of God as an interventionist."*

Somebody said, "God provides maximum support, but minimal protection."

Does God intervene to protect us? No.

Does God provide a means of support in the midst of our tragedies? Yes, most certainly. I believe that God suffers along with us. I believe that God can be trusted, even when it seems as if he is not on our side.

We need to hang on to the fact that God has intervened in our planet by sending Jesus Christ, and by his suffering and dying on the cross God demonstrates that there is nothing in all creation that can separate us from his love.

I have moved away from the original text, so, back to where we started: the voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" The testimony of the witnesses: "We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain".

To those who have glimpsed the glory of Christ, God says, "This is my Son, the Beloved: listen to him!"

"Listen to him". And what does God's Son say to us?

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. (John 13: 34).

Beware: this love may prove costly. It involves us in sharing the mission of Jesus. Peter, James and John, saw in Jesus a truth more glorious than anything they could have predicted, and they heard the word of God which would send them out on a love-mission which stayed with them until they met their death. All of them, and Paul, gave up their lives for their faith, and I suspect that none of them would have wished it any different. Once we have glimpsed the transfigured Christ, nothing else matters as much it did.

We had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honour and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, 'This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.' We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.

See, and recognise, the transformed and transforming Christ. Hear and listen.

See and hear, and then obey.

Amen.

Let us pray:

Most loving God, we thank you for the radiance that transfigured the whole being of Jesus of Nazareth.

We give thanks for the light that has broken through in every generation since, even into ours.

Please teach us to treasure *our* special transfigured moments, that they may be a lasting encouragement for us when we must travel across hot and dusty plains, or through the valley of the shadow. Help us to travel faithfully, lovingly, and with the courage that refuses to be put down by bullying fears.

Through Jesus Christ our Saviour. Amen.

During the next hymn please bring the Offering to the Chancel

3rd Hymn 355 You, Lord, Are Both Lamb and Shepherd

Dedication of Offering :

God of new life,

out of the abundance of our lives we offer these gifts to you.

Through your blessing, and our willingness to share,

may these offerings become a source for hope and love

in this church family, and in the community beyond us,

in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession:

In the two weeks since I was last with you, we have all been horrified by the huge earthquakes in Turkey and Syria, and grieved by the continuing war in Ukraine and elsewhere. In our own country we face rising prices, aggravated by strikes, and industrial action, and we continue to see senseless murder in our cities. There is so much to bring to God. Where do we start?

Let us pray:

Almighty God,

In the face of the devastation brought to Turkey and Syria by the huge earthquakes, the destruction and misery brought to Ukraine by war, we struggle to find words.

We can only guess at the grief and stress endured by families who have lost loved ones, or await news, or continue to hope that they have survived.

In sincerity and compassion may we hold them in our hearts.

We pray for all the people affected, people of every faith and of no faith.

Through earthquake, wind, and fire, may it yet be possible to discern that still, small voice of calm and compassion.

We pray for the injured and traumatised, for those who have lost their homes and possessions, that they may find shelter and warmth and sustenance.

Especially we pray for children, confused and frightened by what is happening.

May you be for all an oasis of peace.

Lord God, we thank you for those who are already responding to the urgent needs for aid:

for rescue teams searching for survivors and bodies, we ask endurance and resilience;

for those working to provide temporary shelter, we pray for swift delivery of equipment.

For all those in communities trying to offer comfort and help to their neighbours, we pray that you will give them selfless compassion.

We pray for the world's response.

Guide those in power that, at least for a time, they may set aside questions of politics and self-interest, and earnestly, urgently, compassionately, decide how to respond.

We pray that you will stir the hearts of all of us, and the hearts of people throughout the world, in generosity towards all those in desperate need in Turkey and Syria, in Ukraine and elsewhere.

Gracious God,

in the face of such appalling suffering, our own troubles may seem trivial,

yet, in a moment of silence, we bring to you those known to us who are ill, or worried, or grieving, all those for whom we have particular concerns.

Pause

Lord, we are your voice and your hands in this place. Show us how we can help.

In Jesus's name we ask.

Amen.

4th Hymn 476 Mine eyes have seen the glory

Choir: Hymn 169 *Praise the Lord with the sound of trumpet*

Afterthought: by Bruce Prewer (*slightly edited*):

I Believe

In a Light that is brighter than all lights,
I believe.

A light that shone at the beginning, and called into existence creatures of light,
a light that guided Abraham and Sarah to a new land and mighty destiny,
a light that illuminated David's poems and flooded Isaiah's proclamations,
a light that has never left itself without witness among all nations and cultures,
I believe.

A light that shone in Bethlehem and brought shepherds running with joy,
a light that drew Galilean crowds to hear about a father's prodigal love,
a light that enveloped the meek, the poor, the lame and the diseased,
I believe.

A light that was a dazzling radiance on the mount of revelation,
a light that blazed with unspeakable glory on the hill of crucifixion,
a light that burst free from the stone tomb on the first Easter morning,
I believe.

In a Light brighter than all lights, *I believe.*
So help me, God! Amen! (*Bruce Prewer, edited*)

5 Closing Hymn: 463 Fairest Lord Jesus

Closing Words and Benediction:

May the grace of the transfigured and transfiguring Christ,
the love of the transfiguring God,
and the friendship of the transfiguring Spirit,
be with us all
And the blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
be with you, and remain with you,
now and always. Amen.

Doxology:

(Hy. 786) May the God of peace go with us as we travel from this place;
May the love of Jesus keep us firm in hope and full of grace.

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