

starters for Sunday

Transfiguration Sunday

7 February 2016

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to thank Rev Dr Laurence Whitley, Minister of Glasgow Cathedral, for his thoughts on Transfiguration Sunday.

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Quick Guide...

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](#)

This Sunday, the one immediately before Lent, is traditionally known as Quinquagesima, the Latin for fifty. It means it is fifty days until Easter.

The theme of today's readings is God's glory.

[Exodus 34: 29-35](#)

The passage illustrates that Yahweh is the God of the second chance, for Moses had already been given stone tablets on which the fundamental, covenant commands expected of the Israelites were inscribed. However, when he returned to base camp he found that Aaron had made a golden bull-calf and allowed the people to sacrifice to it. This apostasy led Moses to smash the tablets. He has here returned to the mountain and received a second version.

Sinai was also where Moses encountered God's glory. The word's root meaning is to do with weight and heaviness. From there it came to carry the idea of wealth, reputation, worth and splendour. Moses was not permitted to risk his life by attempting to see God's splendour, but here we see that intimate closeness to Him indeed has an effect. It lights up the spirit of a person until his whole being glows.

Note how Moses did not notice his face shone. This may well be connected to his humility – see Numbers 12: 3: “Moses was the most humble man on earth.”

Note also how medieval statues and paintings of Moses depict him as having horns. This was because the Hebrew for “radiant” and “horn” has the same root word, and St Jerome's Latin bible [Vulgate] confused the two.

It is not clear why Moses veiled his face when he had finished speaking to the people. Paul suggests why [see below] but it is entirely possible that Moses was simply signifying that the word he had been speaking from the Lord had come to an end.



[Psalm 99](#)

Here we remember that aspect of God's glory which is His unutterable majesty. The psalm describes three ways in which He is so completely "other," that is, holy.

First, His mere presence causes all things and all life to tremble. The cherubim were celestial beings, usually portrayed as having wings, hands, feet and human faces. They were often thought of as guarding sacred things like the Ark of the Covenant. However, in this context they are possibly associated with the pagan gods of other nations. In which case, the psalmist sees them as having no status here other than providing merely the lower supports of God's eternal throne.

Secondly, because He is holy, God cannot countenance those things which deny His nature. Yet, because He is the God who acts, He does not detachedly dole out punishment, but moves to establish justice and righteousness - God's justice being the activity of righting wrong, and righteousness being that quality in a person which reflects His nature.

Thirdly, the point about Moses, Aaron and Samuel calling upon the name of the Lord was that they constantly did so on behalf of others rather than for themselves. Usually it was on behalf of an outrageously disobedient people. We learn here that, despite God's purity and holiness, He still finds a way to forgive and protect them.

[2 Corinthians 3: 12 – 4: 2](#)

Paul's interpretation of why Moses replaced his veil was probably a tradition of the Rabbis, namely that if the light on Moses' face was fading, then he did not want the people to see it – or perhaps think his authority was fading also. This allows Paul to make the point that the glory of the old covenant also faded and that Jewish people nonetheless still held fast to it, their minds being hardened. But in Christ, the new covenant is shown forth.

Unlike the drudgery of trying to obey the laws of the old covenant, the Spirit of the Lord brings freedom from that, because it lights us up with a joy which makes us want to serve God. At the same time, that closeness to God through Christ gives us something better than the experience of Moses and his people, for instead of it obliging us to veil our faces, the Spirit works from within, changing us into his likeness.



It is in his own progress towards sharing the glory of God that Paul finds cause not to lose heart, despite the continual criticism he has received from the Corinthian church. He doesn't blame his opponents, but feels they have been blinded by satanic forces from seeing - as he did on the Damascus road - the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the likeness of God.

[Luke 9: 28-36](#)

To complete the picture of God's glory, here we have it manifested in Jesus in the Transfiguration. With it, Luke has consciously associated the scene with Moses at Sinai, being careful to give such details as it being up a mountain, that there were three companions [cf. Exodus 24: 9], that Jesus' face changed, that he became dazzling white, and that a cloud came down upon them. Luke even uses the word "exodus" for "departure".

The significance of the booths is difficult. The appearance of Moses and Elijah was commonly thought to prefigure the coming of the end of the age. If Peter was thinking this when he made his building suggestion, he was only half right: the new age had begun to come, but, as with the Israelites in the desert, there was still a hard and difficult journey to make.

Sermon Ideas

1. There was once an ad for a Christian exhibition which claimed that, as one of the attractions, there would be "a statue of God - life-sized." It is anyone's guess what "life-sized" means, but what is certainly true is that everyone has a different picture in their mind when they think of God. The people of the bible experienced Him in many ways and roles - father or healer or guide or general or judge, to name only a few. It depended on their need at the time.
2. Today's readings speak of His majesty, and it is likely He appeared as such because, for both Moses and Jesus, it was at a critical moment when they were about to embark upon a momentous and frightening journey. So it was the right time for them to know God as the great and all-powerful Lord who yet would be with them every step of the way.
3. People sometimes say they would like to find and experience God in their lives, but they feel they are doomed to be disappointed, especially when they read of the extraordinary and mysterious encounters described in today's lessons. They feel nothing even like it



could ever happen to them. But does that have to be so? Perhaps the answer lies in asking oneself some questions:

4. First: Do you really want to find God? Someone once said that when people claim they cannot find God, it's often for the same reason as that of a burglar who says he cannot find a policeman. Are we really looking?

Usually that tacit reluctance stems from a fear of the demands that God would then put upon the seeker in terms of service and sacrifice. We don't want to change. But Paul deals with that in his words to Corinth, where he points out that to experience God is to find such joy that everything changes anyway, including one's wants and ambitions. Serving becomes the great source of satisfaction. Thus David Livingstone, for all his privations, could make the extraordinary statement: "I have never made a sacrifice in my life!"

5. Secondly: Have you removed all obstructions? Very often, when God does come to meet us, we are adept at putting obstructions in His way, like anger, resentment, jealousy and unforgiveness. In the Beatitudes, Jesus says that those who will see God are those who are "pure in heart." The word pure has a variety of nuances, but basically describes someone who has cleared all decks, settled all debts and is single-minded in what they are doing. Sometimes we are like the half-asleep disciples in the gospel story, and just as their seeing was defective, by our casual attitude towards what clings to us, so is ours.
6. Thirdly: Are you prepared to wait? God's timing may not be the same as what we want but it is always perfect. The post-war pioneer of divine healing, Cameron Peddie, describes how he decided to set aside the last hour of every day to seek in meditation a closer experience of God. He pursued his hour of watching and waiting for a year, but nothing happened. He continued it faithfully for another year, but nothing happened. Then he did it for another year, and then another. He was tempted to give up, but then at the end of the fifth year, he described what happened: "Suddenly I felt myself gripped by a strange, benevolent power that filled me with an unspeakable sense of happiness.... It was supreme and final bliss! Joy filled my heart and overflowed in tears, helplessly I cried like a child, the tears pouring from my eyes. All I could say was "Father, oh Father". I was the Prodigal Son arriving home and the Father had fallen on my neck and was kissing me. I had reached, I knew, the home



of ultimate truth and all things were clear and plain. All doubts vanished. Every question-mark was erased and I knew, I simply knew that God is and that He rewards all who diligently seek Him.”¹

7. A final point to note: experiencing the majesty of God is not a recipe for inactivity. No sooner had Jesus experienced the majesty of God than he went down into the world of human need and was engaging with demons. To meet God is at once to be commissioned for His work.

Time with Children

[Purchase a small commercial bubbles dispenser but also mix your own solution using washing up liquid and glycerine. Then make a large wand using a wire hanger.]

Say that anything anyone can do, you can always do it better. Take for example blowing bubbles. Ask a child to blow some using the normal dispenser. Then you produce your big one and your bowl of viscous liquid. Your bubbles are enormous.

But, there is one thing about bubbles, however magnificent. What is it? They don't last.

When the disciples saw the glorious vision of Jesus on the mountaintop, they wanted it to go on and on. They were surely sad when it did not last. But not to worry, that wonderful memory would not only stay with them forever, but it would also have made them sure that God was with Jesus and that they could not go wrong if they followed his example and did what he commanded, which was to spread faith, hope and love – the very things which do indeed, the Bible tells us, last forever!

¹ J. Cameron Peddie, *The Forgotten Talent* [Fontana Books 1966], p. 38.



Prayers

Collect

God of light and truth,
open our eyes to the glory of your presence
in the world around us,
but chiefly in the face
of Jesus Christ your Son our Lord;
that we may grow into his likeness,
and attain the happy fulfilment of our hope
when the splendour of the Saviour
will be revealed;
through the same Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns
with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

First Prayer

“It does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.”

Brighter than the sun at morning,
more dazzling than the canvass of the night is your glory, Lord God.

We cannot imagine the magnificence of your being,
the lustre of your majesty.

All we can do is bow.

And so we do.

We envy the privilege of those who on that mountainside
witnessed the Master in the glow of heavenly meeting.

That moment was theirs,

but by your Spirit we still may stumble towards you,



the Light of Lights.

Forgive us for the things that detain us from drawing nearer.

You tell us Lord not to be anxious about material things

and we claim we have heard you,

yet time and again our deeds and priorities shame us.

We stroll through the overflowing store cupboards of our existence

and all that embarrasses stands out:

what we never use is still preserved,

what we never share is hidden lest others might see,

what we could not need is given pride of place.

So liberate us, we pray, Lord Christ.

We are imprisoned by the anxiety of things,

when you came to set us free to enjoy the liberty of life, love

and the company of you whose smile is more than gold,

whose presence is greater than riches

and whose grace will daily bring us forgiveness,

restoring and the wonder of the gospel's great adventure through all our days. Amen

Second Prayer

So often we hardly give thought to your presence Lord God,

unthinkingly, we walk past you on busy errands,

imagining that all difficulties can be resolved on our strength

and by our arranging.

But on such moments as this,

we know how foolish such fancies are.

You are the only power for the triumph of good and health and peace in the world,

and you invite us as now to lean upon that strength

and bring before you all the needs of our country and our world.



Look down we pray upon life's casualties.

Those who have got into difficulties of some sort...

a wrong judgement , a foolish change of direction, an unnecessary gamble.

We remember those hurt by something done to them –

a betrayal of friendship, an act of unkindness,

a constant humiliating or bullying.

We remember victims of the economic downturn,

small businesses, those threatened with redundancy or already jobless.

We know you watch over each of us with care

and you are never distracted from our cause,

so we pray let your embrace be felt now by the fearful and distressed.

We pray for any facing danger in these days,

especially those in our armed forces –

and we do not forget to bless and pray for their families as well.

Guide and counsel all in authority in our parliaments and in our city,

and we ask blessing upon the Queen and all the royal family.

We pray lastly for ourselves

and especially if any of us have challenges and crises to face this week.

Be close to all such.

Be close also to those drawing near their journey's end.

May they be sure that as one sun sets upon them,

yet a greater one rises – the blazing light of your glorious presence

from where has flown forever all sorrow and pain

and where the peace that one day all the world will know

will have already come to pass.

Amen.





In addition to the above prayers, prepared by our contributor, other prayers may be found in *Living Stones* which is the theme for this year's Pray Now. It was also the theme for Heart and Soul 2015. *Living Stones* is available from [St Andrew Press](#).

Musical Suggestions

CH3 217	O wondrous type, O vision fair
CH4 601	Look upon us, blessed Lord
CH4 201	Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness
CH4 132	Immortal, invisible, God only wise
Songs of Fellowship (2) 935	My Jesus, my Saviour
Songs of Fellowship (2) 1117	Who is there like you?
CH4 353	Bright the cloud and bright the glory
CH4 748	Through saints we glimpse the light of Christ



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. [Living Stones](#) 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 in 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 Laurence Whitley 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.

