



## Opening Responses

Come, Holy Spirit, and open our hearts  
**for we're gathered in God's presence.**

Come, Holy Spirit, and ready our minds  
**for we're ready to meet with Christ.**

Come, Holy Spirit, and fire our imaginations  
**for we're open to new possibilities.**

## 'Starter for Ten' Discussion Question

Where have you caught glimpses of God in the mix of everyday life, and what difference has this made to you?

## Prayers of Thanks and Praise

God of awe and wonder,  
you appeared to Moses on the mountainside,  
made his face shine with your brilliant light,  
and gifted your people laws to help them live well.  
You met with Elijah on the mountainside,  
not in fire or earthquake or wind, but in the still-small voice,  
transforming his despair into hope.  
You appeared to Jesus' disciples on the mountainside,  
in dazzling light and swirling cloud,  
and called them to trust your Son in the dark days ahead.

And now, God of awe and wonder,  
you meet with us in worship, in daily life, in service of others,  
transforming the ordinary into the extraordinary.  
Through our praise this day, and in the days to come,  
surprise us, change us, guide us, we pray.  
In Jesus' name. **Amen**

## Prayers of Renewal

God of relationship and community,  
love isn't just what you do, but what you are:  
from the Father to the Son to the Spirit and back again,  
at your heart is movement, a dance of love.  
You long to draw all creation into your divine dance;  
you renew and remake us, day by day.

Let us bring to God those things in need of that renewal:

We bring to you those things for which we are sorry:  
**Restore us and heal us.**

We bring to you the times we've failed to love one another:  
**Restore us and heal us.**

We bring to you the burdens we carry and sorrows we bear:  
**Restore us and heal us.**

We bring to you the injustices and oppression in our world:  
**Restore us and heal us.**

We bring to you the failings and disunity of your Church:  
**Restore us and heal us.**

God of transformation and hope,  
you set us free from the past, to flourish in the future.  
Thank you that you forgive, restore and call us on. **Amen**

**Reading** Mark 9:2 – 9

### **Sermon**

As some of you might know, my academic background is in physics, specifically the physics of black holes. In 1915, a former patent clerk named Albert Einstein formulated the ‘General Theory of Relativity’, which predicted the existence of black holes. Black holes result from the gravitational collapse of massive stars when they run out of fuel. The name reflects the fact that even light cannot escape from them. As a result, scientists *had* only been able to observe black holes via noting their effects upon other bodies. However, during 2019, teams working together across the world combined the observational clout of their telescopes, and we now have the first image of a black hole, surrounded by the superhot material its gravitational field is sucking in. Having had the opportunity to make my own modest contribution to the study of black holes when I did my PhD, I think this is amazing in its own right. More than that, however, it gives an exciting glimpse into the seemingly endless creativity of our God.

I am aware that not all scientists would go along with this sentiment, but I’m perfectly happy with the notion that the natural sciences and Christian faith aren’t just compatible, but vital conversation partners. My experience of doing scientific research deepened, and enriched, my faith, because I realised that there is still much which we are yet to understand, and so much beautiful mathematics that we have not yet stumbled upon. When I had my precious moments of discovery, it felt very much like being on ‘holy ground’, because I was exploring aspects of the creation nobody else had seen before. Moreover, I’m yet to come across a convincing ‘secular’ explanation for why those equations I pondered in Durham’s many coffee shops should exhibit any resemblance to the universe at all, let alone describe it so well. There are clearly hidden depths to God’s handiwork which are even more mysterious than black holes! I was privileged to glimpse some

pieces of the jigsaw, but there was, and is, much more to discover... Every time we think we have finished physics, new doors open, and hence we find ourselves exploring even deeper mysteries.

Today’s set reading recalls the unusual story of the Transfiguration, an event that is recalled by all three of the Synoptic Gospels – Mark, Matthew and Luke. Jesus is pictured as standing alongside both the man who had received the law from God upon Mount Sinai, and the greatest of the Prophets, who heard God’s still small voice upon the mountainside in his time of crisis. It’s very tempting to read this story largely through a theological lens, and it is true that Mark intends to reveal much about who Jesus is, and why he matters. However, this isn’t the only way to explore its significance. All three Gospel writers recognise that Peter’s trying to prolong the moment was misplaced. These disciples had glimpsed a spectacular piece of the jigsaw, but they needed to come down the mountain to see more of the ‘picture’ of the glory of God, albeit amid the rather messier circumstances of controversy and conflict awaiting them when they got there.

To make sense of why Peter may have responded in the manner in which he did, we need to put the narrative of the Transfiguration into its proper context. Stepping back just a pace or two, into Mark 8, we find Jesus explaining to his disciples that he had to journey onwards to the city of Jerusalem and suffer there at the hands of the religious authorities, before rising again three days later. Peter could not deal with this and began to take Jesus to task, telling him this could never happen before being thoroughly rebuked himself. He was firmly told to “get behind me, Satan!”. Jesus then said that if they wanted to be his followers, his friends would each need to deny themselves, take up their crosses, and follow him. In other words, they needed to be willing to die and rise again with Christ, as do we today, as disciples in twenty-first century Britain. I imagine this episode left all of Jesus’ friends feeling somewhat shaken up, but Peter especially may have been wondering where he now stood. If I had been in his shoes, I’m

not sure I wouldn't have had the same reaction to being told that I'd left everything safe and familiar to follow someone to their death...

So it was that, six days after this dramatic bit of teaching, Jesus led his three closest friends up a mountainside. This itself is significant, because such places were often the settings where encounters with God took place, as we also see with Moses within the Exodus story. Without warning, Jesus was transfigured before their very eyes, and like Moses after he'd come down from Sinai, his face shone and his garments were dazzling white. Moses himself then appeared, along with Elijah, who never died, but was carried off into heaven within a fiery chariot. The two spoke with Jesus – although none of the three Synoptic Gospels tell us what was said. Peter, who we are informed in verse six was so scared he didn't know what he was saying in the heat of the moment, offered to build the three tabernacles – one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah – just like the dwelling built to house the Ark of the Covenant in Israel's wilderness years. If this was an attempt to prolong the moment, it didn't succeed, for a cloud then descended down onto the top of the mountain, as when Moses received the Law. Mirroring the pattern of his earlier baptism, Jesus was affirmed as God's beloved Son. He told his scared disciples not to be afraid and then, when they looked up, the drama was all over.

Now, as I have tried to indicate, the details of the story make various clear connections with the Exodus narratives of Moses receiving the Law from God in a fiery cloud on Mount Sinai, and his guiding of the people on their journey through the wilderness. Jesus' conversation with Moses and Elijah reflects his standing in that same tradition, as the One who embodied in his very being the life and calling of Israel, and who would bring their journey to its conclusion. Hence, the story has deep theological significance; it is full of symbolism, and deeper meaning. However, as I have also argued here, it matters that Peter couldn't prolong the moment. Though the glimpse of God's glory the three received was spectacular, they needed to risk descending into

the messiness of everyday life if they wanted to discover any further pieces of the jigsaw. Glimpses of God's glory may be discovered in worship, but one lesson that the story of the Transfiguration teaches us is that there's yet more to be discovered in everyday discipleship.

When I was studying for my PhD, I shared my office with ten others, all of whom described themselves as atheists or agnostics – making me the only person of faith in that environment. Engaging with them definitely felt like coming down the mountain compared with the joys of pondering Einstein's beautiful equations! More than once, I found myself fielding questions designed to catch me out, or being the butt of office jokes. However, when it was calmer and the more dominant characters weren't about, some of the lads would speak to me about their problems, and even on occasion, ask me to pray for/with them. While the cynic in me wonders how genuine this was at times, when I look back on it, I did catch glimpses of the glory of God within those conversations, and it was actually quite a privilege to be trusted with some of the stories shared with me.

So, bringing all of this together, I wonder what it might mean for you to descend down the mountain, and where journeying faithfully with God might lead you? For my part, I thank God that I have had many opportunities to glimpse the glory of God at the top of the mountain, in the wonder of scientific research, and the privilege of presiding at the Eucharist. I also thank God for the times I have come down from the mountain top, and caught glimpses of God in the complexity and messiness of everyday life – as did Peter, James and John. Friends, we cannot see the fuller picture of the glory of God if we're not ready to step down the mountain and engage with the real world out there, which is not always nice and neat, and suitably sanitised for delicate sensibilities! May God grant us the courage to take a step out of our comfort zones, in this coming season of Lent, and open our eyes to glimpses of divine glory in the most unlikely places. Amen

## Recommended Resource of the Week

A classic book by Michael Ramsey called *The Glory of God and the Transfiguration of Christ* (1949) is this week's selection. It explores what we can learn from the mystery of the Transfiguration and bears many resonances with today's testing context.

## Prayers of Intercession

### Lord's Prayer

### Blessing (Collect for Sunday before Lent)

God of life and light,  
your Son was revealed in majesty  
before he suffered death on the cross.  
Give us grace to perceive his glory,  
that we may be strengthened to follow him  
and be changed into his likeness, from glory to glory,  
as we receive the blessings of divine love;  
who is alive and reigns with you,  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever. **Amen**