



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**

Readings Exodus 34:29 – 35
2 Kings 2:9 – 12
Matthew 17:1 – 9

Sermon

Where might you catch glimpses of God in everyday life? Pondering this for myself made me realise that two ways this has happened to me involve engaging with creation, albeit via rather different routes. The first is photography, especially landscapes and wildlife pictures; I have heard some people argue we should not get caught up in the attempt to capture a scene and just be in the moment, but I find that having my camera with me helps in paying attention to what is going on around me and noticing the beautiful or unusual, and hence it has become something that helps my spirituality. The second is science and physics in particular; I have been fortunate enough to be funded to conduct scientific research at an earlier stage of my life, and even as I am now more of an interested onlooker, there are amazing and unexpected glimpses of the creativity and wonder of God to be seen as we deepen our understanding of the universe. However, it is true that both of these things might be described as activities that lift one above the messiness of life, and I have learnt the hard way that God is more often found at the bottom of the mountain than at the top...

Today's three readings remind us of the 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 leader of Israel who had received the Law from God on Mount Sinai, and the greatest of the Prophets, who tuned into the still small voice of God upon the mountainside in his time of crisis. It is very tempting to read this account largely through a theological lens, and Matthew does intend to reveal much about who Jesus is and why he matters. However, this is not the only way to understand its significance, and it is notable that all three Gospel writers recognise that Peter's trying

to prolong the moment by pitching tents for those divine figures 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 glory of God, in this case amid the much 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 a pace or two into Matthew 16, 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 cross and follow him. This teaching was not comforting and easy to sit with, because it meant that they needed to be ready and 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 occurred, as we discovered with Moses in our Exodus reading. 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, and the two spoke with Jesus – though none of the three Synoptic Gospels tell us what was said. Peter, who we are informed

in other versions of the incident did not know what he was saying in the heat of the moment, offered to build 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. While he was still talking, a cloud descended as when Moses received the Law, and as in his baptism, Jesus was affirmed by a heavenly voice as God’s beloved Son. He told his frightened friends not to be afraid, and offered a comforting touch before all suddenly returned to calm.

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 could not prolong the moment through the putting up of tents for the three divine figures. That glimpse of God’s glory was so spectacular that telling the other nine in the core group of twelve disciples about it would have to wait until after the resurrection of Jesus. Yet, James and John and Peter still needed to risk descending down the slopes of the mountain and back into the complexity of everyday life, if they wanted to uncover further pieces of the jigsaw. One lesson the story of the Transfiguration thus teaches us is that there is much more to be discovered about God’s glory in the midst of everyday life – even as we all need to step back from it and climb the mountain from time to time in order to nurture our spiritual lives.

Consequently, as we turn our attention to Lent once again, perhaps the key takeaway here is the need for balance. Peter needed divine reassurance and found it up the mountain, yet could not remain thus removed from everyday life forever. We too need to set aside some

time in order to cultivate those practices which nourish and energise us, if we are to have the spiritual resources to be disciples of Christ. You do not need me to tell you that this season is demanding in-of-itself without the cost-of-living crises, industrial unrest, and the other turbulent events going on around us, and we need to step back from time to time to keep ourselves going. Yet, like Peter, we cannot step away forever, and we too need to come down the mountain, to seek glimpses of God’s glory in the midst of mess and complexity. Hence, friends, I pray that God will help you find the right balance for you in this coming Lenten season, so that together we might shine out that dazzling light of God’s love into our communities. Amen

Recommended Resource of the Week

John Dear’s 2007 book *Transfiguration* draws on the story to inspire us to join in Jesus’s mission of bringing peace and justice.

Prayers of Intercession

Let us pray:

Lord of glory, it is good that we are here.

In peace we make our prayer to you.

Help us set our faces towards where you would send us.

Lord, look with favour. **Lord, transfigure and heal.**

Lord of glory, look with favour on your Church,

proclaiming your beloved Son to the world

and listening to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

May she be renewed in holiness, and so reflect your glory.

Lord, look with favour. **Lord, transfigure and heal.**

Lord of glory, look with favour on the nations of the world,
scarred by hatred, strife and war.

May they be healed by the touch of your hand.

Lord, look with favour. **Lord, transfigure and heal.**

Lord of glory, look with favour on those in need and distress,
suffering as your Son has suffered.

May Christ the Morning Star bring the light of his presence.

Lord, look with favour. **Lord, transfigure and heal.**

Lord of glory, look with favour on all Christ's siblings.

Open our eyes to see him in majesty,

and to be changed into his likeness from glory to glory.

Lord, look with favour. **Lord, transfigure and heal.**

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**