



# Weekly Worship Resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

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Issue 49:

Sunday 14th February 2021

## Today's readings

### **Psalm 99: 1–7 (“Praise to God for his holiness”)**

The Lord is king; let the peoples tremble! He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake!

The Lord is great in Zion; he is exalted over all the peoples.

Let them praise your great and awesome name. Holy is he!

Mighty King, lover of justice, you have established equity; you have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob.

Extol the Lord our God; worship at his footstool. Holy is he!

Moses and Aaron were among his priests, Samuel also was among those who called on his name. They cried to the Lord, and he answered them.

He spoke to them in the pillar of cloud; they kept his decrees, and the statutes that he gave them. Amen. *(NRSV)*

### **Matthew 17: 1–9 (“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.’ Amen. *(NRSV)*

## Today's hymns

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|---|---|---|--|
| 1 | <i>And can it be, that I should gain</i> (CH:396)                 | 2 | <i>In heavenly love abiding</i> (CH:551) |
| 3 | <i>O God, thou art the Father</i> (CH:119)                        | 4 | <i>Holy, holy, holy</i> (CH:111)         |
| 5 | <i>Lord, for the years your love has kept and guided</i> (CH:159) |   |  |

# In the Name of the Father and of

**T**he Transfiguration is a section of the gospel story which always appears at this time of year, just as we are preparing to enter into the season of Lent. Without doubt, it is one of the richest and most mystical of episodes in the whole of Jesus' ministry, when you and I, the readers, are transported to the heights. There, in the company of Peter, James and John, we are witnesses to a mountaintop experience in which the veil between heaven and earth is revealed in all its gossamer thinness.

This is the kind of gospel passage that is quite easy to preach on year by year because there are so many sermon starters waiting to be called upon once you get into the text. There is the small party which goes away into solitude, there to undergo a first-hand spiritual experience (surely, a strong message). There is the dramatic glory of Christ, seen in company with Moses and Elijah (also strong). There is the very voice of God echoing the divine message of Jesus' Baptism in the words, "This is my Son ..." (extremely strong).

Yes, when we go deep inside the story of the Transfiguration, there is a lot of preaching energy to be tapped into. But what if we choose to stay outside the story? What might we learn if we actually hold back from joining Peter and James and John, as we decline Jesus' invitation to go with the group, remaining instead down here at sea level?

Today, let's just do that. Let's stay here and wave the party off. We watch them climbing up the mountain, and soon they are just tiny specks on the hillside. Then they slip off round a bend and we see them no longer. We are alone. So ... now what?

Well, now we return to our daily round of ordinary living: the work and the chores; the meetings and the conversations; the tea breaks and the lunch hours. We don't know what's happening to Jesus and his party high above us, but we do know that what's happening to us is every bit as predictable as it is unremarkable. Life goes on. Still, we console ourselves with the simple fact that we are needed down here away from the excitement of the Jesus adventure. There are family members to see to, whether young ... or old ... or both. There is our workplace with all its demands. There is a house to keep. There are people in our neighbourhood who rely on us to do important things for them in their pressing situations. And all of that, when added together, provides a pretty convincing argument for staying away from any kind of spiritual experiment, especially one that might involve ghostly patriarchs and voices from clouds.

When faced with the possibility of seeking a closer walk with God, we make our excuses and stay down on the low level of human existence, instead of tying our bootlaces and setting off on that long climb into the unknown heights.

Thank you for the offer, Jesus, but I'm alright. Things to do. People to see. How it is.

Given the choice of going with Christ on an adventure of faith or staying right here in the cool reality of home, we opted for the ordinary, and that, as it turns out, is precisely what we end up getting: a very ordinary life. Our choice certainly speaks of the need to fulfil our personal duties, but might our choice also have something to say about a faith which is (to employ a much-used 21st century term) "risk averse"?

If you and I are guilty of pigeon-holing God into a sacred Sunday hour, safe in the company of many other familiar friends, with the warm familiarity of word and music, might it be that we are afraid of the alternative – of entering into the presence of God on a profoundly personal level, just as Peter and James and John experienced in such untamed wonder?

# the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

Perhaps the Transfiguration confuses you and leaves you uneasy. You're OK with the idea of a bit of a hill walk, but you're less than enthusiastic about being led into the presence of the Almighty. If that's where you are, you might find the words of the great spiritual writer, Henri Nouwen, very helpful. Here is what Nouwen says about being surprised by God: *At some moments we experience complete unity within us and around us. This may happen when we stand on a mountaintop and are captivated by the view. It may happen when we witness the birth of a child or the death of a friend. It may happen when we have an intimate conversation or a family meal. It may happen in church during a service or in a quiet room during prayer. But whenever and however it happens we say to ourselves: "This is it ... Everything fits ... all I ever hoped for is here."*

Whether in deep mystery or in the most fleeting of moments, these transfiguring experiences can enlighten and enliven us. Yet the prospect of them can also leave us fragile and fearful. The preacher Fred Craddock once said that the presence of God, "is where everyone wants to be and where everybody doesn't want to be". On the one hand, as Christians we place our trust in the God of heaven. On the other hand, we probably feel most at ease when we know that heaven itself is a safe distance off from us. And so we find a tension in our lives between embracing the divine and keeping it remote, at arms' length (sufficiently far away as to pose no real threat).

Not so for Peter and James and John. Did they know where they were going? Probably not, though they certainly had the faith to step out with Jesus and make that big climb. And when they arrived, hot, sweaty and out of breath, what did they make of the mountaintop up there among the billowing clouds? It certainly appears that they were impressed because we find Peter declaring with characteristic boldness:

*'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.'*

In the eyes of Peter, the lure of this great company is just too much. He likes what he sees and he wants more of the same, with Jesus, Moses and Elijah chatting together, sharing ideas, planning what might come next – with Peter there, seeing to their needs.

In all honesty, I'm not at all sure that I would have the keenness of Peter. After all, the Bible gives us a fairly clear impression of "holy ground" being a place of risk, where anything can happen and where danger may be just around the corner. Power and might and glory are attributes which can never easily be domesticated. So for those who meet with these divine qualities, there must be a feeling of fear and perhaps even peril, as the mystery of the divine overwhelms our mere humanity. With safety gone, do we stand our ground? Or do we flee in panic, heading down to the lower ground, to the familiar blandness of spiritual safety?

Tempting though it may be to run, I suspect that this solution would be a mistake because once we have experienced God's nearness there on the mountaintop, how can we ever be the same as we were before? Rather than charging down into the valley of security, populated by tasks and travails and meetings and more, we should take this moment as a gift. We should stay and sit. We should listen and learn. And then, once the moment has passed, we should slowly be on our way, going home, not quite the same.

That's the thing about the mountaintop. We can go up one way, yet in coming down we discover the strange ability of God to transfigure everything ... including us.

Amen.

# Praying for others

*Lent is a special season leading up to Easter. It is a time to think about what kind of people we are, and what kind of people God wants us to be. Just before Lent gets under way on Wednesday, we have Shrove Tuesday when our minds turn to pancakes. With that in mind, here is a pancake prayer ... followed by a pancake recipe:*

God of all good things,

With flour, with sugar, with a tiny pinch of salt ...  
... with eggs, with milk, with bowl and spoon and griddle ...  
... we think of pancakes ...  
... and we think of our lives.

Sift us, we pray, smoothing out the lumps and bumps, the things we regret,  
the things we should have done differently.

Add sugar to our beings, helping us to give thanks  
for the sweetness of life lived in your love.

Give us that tiny pinch of salt  
to make the "ordinary" taste even better.

Add milk to build us up, because we will need your strength for our journey.

With an egg we find a symbol of new life,  
encouraging us to look forward to new possibilities.

Take these ingredients, Lord, and mix them all together.  
Then add a bit more milk ... for extra strength!

Spoon our mixture on to the griddle, each spoonful in its own special place.  
Watch the bubbles rise, then turn until we are golden, ready for your service!

And as we share ourselves, let us also share our hunger for justice  
that all may be filled and satisfied.

In Jesus' Name we pray. AMEN.

## **Ingredients for 20 Scottish pancakes:**

*4oz (100g) self-raising flour*

*1oz (25g) caster sugar*

*A tiny pinch of salt*

*1 egg*

*1/4 pint (150ml) milk*

## **Method:**

Sift the flour and salt in a mixing bowl, adding the sugar.

Beat the egg and milk, then mix into the bowl.

Grease the pan, then cook for a couple of minutes over a medium heat,  
turning the pancake once after lots of bubbles have appeared.

Leave to cool for a respectable period ... or just scoff the lot straight out the pan.