THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches
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Today's Bible reading

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

Will you come and follow me (CH533)
Seek ye first the kingdom of God (CH641)
I come with joy, a child of God (CH656)
Fight the good fight (CH517)

Robin is on Presbytery business this week, so here is a previous sermon for this day in the Church year, Transfiguration Sunday. He preached it in 2011.

I am not that great when it comes to topical footballing references in my sermons and make no apology for this. (Once someone makes football interesting, I will do my best to get interested.) But some time ago I caught a line from a BBC Scotland results programme that had come on the telly. It seems that Motherwell Football Club were losing by three goals to nil in their fixture against Inverness Caledonian Thistle – and this, a mere six days after the Lanarkshire boys in claret and gold had drubbed the mighty Glasgow Celtic. The presenter came up with a classic sporting line, as originally spoken by a former Motherwell chairman: "Today, a peacock. Tomorrow … a feather duster."

Or perhaps, to put that same general sentiment in a different way: "Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die."

In fact, this line is rather appropriate for us today, because the story of the Transfiguration is very much one that revolves around that notion. Right now, on this last Sunday before the season of Lent, the enlivening and enlightening story of the Transfiguration gives us something of a high point to think about, just before we turn towards Jerusalem and Christ's lonely trek to the Cross. So yes, this is a case of celebrating "now", because all too soon our attention will have to switch to that all-too uncertain journey to Calvary and to the death of God's Son.

The Transfiguration is one of those New Testament passages that has us looking back through the mists of time. This story speaks not just of itself. It echoes another period in the story of faith. For as we see Jesus going up a mountain to meet with his heavenly Father, we are encouraged to remember how Moses did exactly the same thing in centuries far, far gone. In each account, whether in the Old Testament book of Exodus or the New Testament gospel of Matthew, we find ourselves witnessing a divine encounter. In each story we hear of God speaking as though from a heavenly cloud. In each case we find the traveller's appearance changing – his face glowing – in the presence of the divine.

So what's going on in our reading from Matthew's gospel? Looking at the way this Jewish writer Matthew tells his story to his Jewish readers, we see that Matthew is saying loud and clear: Jesus is like Moses: a prophet on a mission from God. Jesus is like Moses: the one who receives something special from God on the mountainside. Jesus is like Moses: the one who will lead the people from dreadful captivity into liberation. Jesus, in short, … is the new Moses. And so much more.

In today's story, we encounter Jesus on a hillside, yet we also find his friends Peter, James and John there with him: three of the so-called 12 disciples, set apart for this special day trip. At the summit of the mountain, the extraordinary and awesome moment of Transfiguration is witnessed by them, as Jesus glows with a rare brightness. And then, to add to the drama, we are told that Moses himself, and also Elijah, appear with Jesus. This is a moment worth keeping; a moment you might wish to hold on to for as long as possible. And so Peter – headstrong, impetuous Peter – comes up with one of his spur-of-the-moment ideas, that seems such a brainwave at the time. "Lord," he says, "how good it is that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

Often, I suspect, people have that very same feeling on the last day of a holiday, or on a Sunday evening following a lovely weekend. They feel that they don't want to

leave the mountaintop of relaxation and leisure for the trials of the office or the factory or the classroom on their first day back at work.

We can all recognise that the good things of life are high points. By definition, a high point is a peak from which there is only one way to proceed: downwards. You can't keep going up. You can't even go sideways. From the summit of the hill, all you can do is descend. Jesus, however, sees the bigger picture, and Jesus knows that his moment of divine discernment is just that: a moment of validation and confirmation; a point on a journey, and nothing more. There comes a time for returning to the real world, because much as we might wish it, the real world will not go away.

The lesson here, I think, is very important for us in our own faith. Recall Jesus' Baptism at the start of his earthly ministry, when the task ahead might well have seemed too great for him. Then, God was there with a voice of fatherly approval. Now, at the Transfiguration, towards the end of Jesus' earthly ministry, once again the task ahead might very well seem too great, yet God is there, as before.

Across his entire ministry Jesus experiences times of grim wilderness desolation, when the voice of God seems distant - perhaps even silent. Times of temptation. Times of abandonment. Times of forsakenness. The gospel writers show us Jesus going through such profoundly human low points in life, just as we do in ours. For us, there may be points of hard decision or of cruel betrayal. In our lives we share such experiences with the Jesus who has been there before us.

Our walk through life can itself seem like a journey to Calvary, and I mean that pretty much as it sounds: a journey through life, where our mortal end draws nearer and nearer, no matter how we might run from death or hide from death or seek to bargain with death. All human life has troubled times, yet it is often in these very lowest of points that the presence of God can be most real for us. There might be a word of faith from a neighbour or a colleague. There might be a smile, or a laugh, or a hug, or a tear which touches us in ways which go beyond our everyday experience. There might be something even more tangible and articulate: a sign or a signal that God's love is there for us, through our pain or through our panic.

And it is precisely at moments such as these that we find, despite ourselves, an unspeakably low point turning into a mountaintop experience, as we find ourselves … found by God.

That perhaps is what Transfiguration means to Jesus there on the mountaintop. He knows – he must know – that his journey is leading him step by step to a deathly confrontation with the forces of merciless human power. But taking time out on another plain, raising himself to a different level, Jesus finds affirmation in the very God who is calling him to keep the faith. Even with so many dark thoughts bearing down upon his mind and his soul, Jesus is still able to be lifted up by his divine encounter on the mountaintop.

We too can seek God's living presence in our own lives. Certainly there are plenty of people who climb the hills of Scotland for that very reason, though the truth is that God is to be found in all sorts of places, some a little more unexpected than others.

So draw near to God in faith, whether in the quiet of your home, or through the ceaseless noise of the high street, the joy of the concert hall or the inexpressibke beauty of the Table of our Lord.

For God is everywhere, and his presence in so many ways is real and true. Amen.

Praying for others

God of mercy and care,
at this uncertain time for our world, when tensions are high and
futures deeply uncertain,
we pray for the peoples of the nations and their leaders.

For the people of Ukraine … may peace with justice reign
as this war-torn land mourns its many losses,
whether of young lives, towns and cities, or hope.
May sense prevail in the talks which lie ahead so that
the horrors of the last decade may be replaced with a future
which offers joy where now there are tears.

For the people of Israel/Palestine … where conflict is written
into history and trust is so hard to muster.
With historic pain and new injuries to be dealt with
may people of peace emerge to fill the desperate void
which now sits so ominously over the Middle East.
Raise up leaders, we pray who are committed to finding better ways
to move forward to a new chapter of an old story.

For us … help us not to shy away from the news,
whether in the papers, on TV and radio, or on-line.
Much as we would prefer to cut ourselves off,
inspire each one of us to listen and to learn.
And to pray, in Jesus' Name. Amen.

Weekly Updates …

March Communion services: Our next Communion services will take place this Sunday (2nd March). As Robin is currently engaged with Presbytery business we will be welcoming back the Rev Mike Watson as the morning's guest preacher.

Lent Daily Thoughts: Our Presbytery is inviting everyone to sign up for a very short daily biblical reflection for each day of Lent, starting this Wednesday. To have a thought arrive on your computer's desktop day by day, contact Caroline Kirk at the Presbytery office: ckirk@churchofscotland.org.uk .

Lent Study Group: Our Lent group will be using a book by Hilary Brand (we've used several of hers, very successfully, in the past) called *The Power of Small Choices*. It is based around not one but two films: *Babette's Feast* and *The Shawshank Redemption*. The discussion group will run for six weeks at 3pm on Tuesday afternoons from Tuesday 4th March until Tuesday 8th April inclusive.

Jars of Grace 2025: Last Sunday our Jars of Grace 2025 project was launched in aid of a village in rural Rwanda which would benefit hugely from having its own 40,0000 litre concrete tank for holding a community water supply. Get collecting coins from now until Easter, and together we can make this dream a reality.

Stated Annual Meetings: These will be held on Sunday 16th February (at Gladsmuir Church) and Sunday 23rd February (at Longniddry Church).

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