

## Readings for the Sunday before Lent

19<sup>th</sup> February 2023

### First Reading: Exodus 24:12-18

The LORD said to Moses, 'Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.' So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. To the elders he had said, 'Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them.'

Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

### Second Reading: 2 Peter 1:16-21

We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honour and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, 'This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.' We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.

So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

### Gospel: St Matthew 17:1-9

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.'

## A Reflection for the Sunday before Lent

One evening, many years ago now, I was walking in the hills when I had the unusual experience of seeing the phenomenon called a Brocken Spectre. Brocken Spectres occur in the mountains when you are walking high on a hillside with cloud below you and the sun behind you, low in the sky. The sunlight causes your shadow to be cast onto the clouds below surrounded by a glowing circle of light in rainbow colours. It is somewhat unnerving because your shadow is enormous, and it looks for all the world like a giant is coming up out of the clouds towards you. However, once you get past that initial shock, it is an awe-inspiring moment and you certainly see a very different view of yourself to normal! On another occasion, I saw what is called a parhelion. I really don't understand how this works, but with clouds and reflections, you apparently see two or more suns side by side with a big halo of light around them. It was also an awe-inspiring sight, so beautiful that it filled me with wonder and joy and praise of God. Such sights are a rare privilege and not things that you easily forget

Today's readings are all about awe-inspiring mountain-top experiences, sights that stopped people in their tracks and which live on in the collective memories of God's people.

Our Gospel reading gives us Matthew's account of Jesus' transfiguration when he is revealed in glory to Peter, James and John, his face shining like the sun and his clothes dazzling white. Then Moses and Elijah appeared, representing the Law and the Prophets, affirming Jesus' authority and faithfulness to the people of Israel. And, for the avoidance of any possible lingering doubt, there is then the voice of God from the cloud declaring Jesus as God's Son. The same words that were heard at his baptism, but with the additional injunction to 'listen to him'.

It is this experience of the Transfiguration that the writer of the second letter of Peter is reflecting on; that they were eyewitnesses, saw Jesus' glory and heard the voice from heaven. And the account of the Transfiguration would have reminded first century Jews of the passage from Exodus we heard, of Moses going up the mountain to receive the stone tablets with the Ten Commandments. The glory of God covered the mountain, appearing as a cloud and as a devouring fire to the people watching below. They must have wondered whether Moses would survive the experience.

In the Bible, mountain-top experiences, cloud and fire are all indicative of the presence, the power and the glory of God. Like Brocken Spectres, parhelia and other such things, they inspire wonder and awe at the greatness and majesty of God.

In Matthew's Gospel, as in Mark's, the account of Jesus' Transfiguration comes at a pivotal point in the narrative, between his ministry in Galilee and his journey to Jerusalem. Up until this point, the Gospel has given us an account of Jesus' ministry in Galilee, his teaching and his healing. It was a ministry that attracted crowds of ordinary people but also the attention of the authorities, with hints of the opposition that was to come. Then, just before the Transfiguration, the Gospel says that Jesus began to show his disciples that 'he must go to Jerusalem, and undergo great suffering ..., and be killed, and on the third day be raised' (16:21). And he also spoke to the disciples of the cost of discipleship: 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me' (16:24). From here on, Jesus is going on the long journey to Jerusalem to take up his cross, facing the increasing opposition that will culminate in his passion and death.

The account of the Transfiguration is used today because, just as it comes at a pivotal point in the Gospel, so the Sunday before Lent is a pivotal point in the church year.

Two weeks ago, we kept Candlemas, the conclusion of the Christmas season. Simeon recognised Jesus as the light of world, a theme that appeared throughout the whole of that season. Today as we turn towards Lent, we hear of the Transfiguration, the climax of the revelations of Jesus' glory, and of his identity as God's Son. There is to be no doubt about who it is that is heading towards Jerusalem, who it is that will suffer and die for you and me, and all the people of the world.

When Jesus was transfigured on the mountain top, the light would have shone out and illuminated those around. That experience was a life-changing experience, one those present remembered and took with them later when they went out to proclaim the Gospel message. Of course, one of the difficulties of illumination is that it isn't selective. When the light shines on us, it shines on everything, not just our good points but also into all the dark corners that we'd rather remained in the shadows. But, letting the light of Christ illuminate us, including our dark corners, is a transformative experience and, while it might seem like quite a scary prospect, it shouldn't be seen as negative.

When I was living in Inverness, I joined the Choral Union. In rehearsals, we normally sat with all the singers of the same part together, but occasionally we were randomised, sitting anywhere as long as you weren't next to someone of the same part. As intended, it was always a moment of truth, no longer surrounded by strong singers, I was able to hear myself all too clearly. But often it proved to be really encouraging: I discovered that I knew the music better than I thought. It also illuminated some dark corners, the bits I discovered I really didn't know, but at least I then knew what I needed to work on. It was slightly scary, but ultimately an encouraging and transformative experience.

The light of Christ illuminating us should be similar. God is not trying to catch us out but to help us grow in our faith. Occasionally, we will find Christ's light in mountain-top experiences of wonder and awe. Perhaps more often, it will be in the everyday experiences of our daily lives.

This coming week, we have Ash Wednesday and the start of Lent. Lent is a good time for some inner transformation, to let the light of Christ shine into some of our dark corners.

How do we approach that? I think the key lies in the words of God in today's Gospel 'Listen to Him'. Similarly, the second letter of Peter urges us to 'Be attentive'. There are many different ways of listening to God – that would be a whole sermon or more in itself. However, we have a wealth of resources available to us to aid our reflections and lead us to prayer, especially in Lent: Lent courses, through church or online, books, podcasts and daily email reflections, to name but a few. So I encourage us all this Lent to choose something and, as we listen to God, we can let him gently illuminate for us those areas of our lives where he wishes to continue transforming us.