

Call to worship (inspired by Psalm 50)

The mighty one, God the Creator,
speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting.
Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth.
Our God comes and does not keep silence.
Speak to us, God, for we are listening.
God the Creator has spoken
God summons the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting.
“Gather to me, my faithful ones”;
We gather to worship you, O God.

Hymn On Jordan’s bank MP538

Offering

God, whose giving knows no ending,
we offer up the treasure that you have entrusted to us;
we offer up the skills and time that you have graciously given to us;
we offer up ourselves in service and praise.
Receive these gifts by your grace.
Multiply and use them through the power of the Holy Spirit
to accomplish Christ’s work of love in the world. **Amen.**

Opening Prayers

We worship you, O God, with songs of praise.
We worship you with words of prayer
and with ears that listen for you to speak
your saving truth into our lives.
We worship you in the silent spaces
where we struggle for hope and for courage.
We long for a glimpse of your glory:
the glory that shines in the darkness
and the darkness cannot overcome it;
the glory that touches lives with a beauty so holy
that it heals the wounded soul;
the glory that gives strength to the weary.

We, who stumble and fall so often, worship you,
longing for your light to shine upon us.
Dazzle us with your holy love, draw us into your purifying presence,
speak to us your transforming truth.
Then, grant us grace to live every moment changed by such glory -
daring to live with hope and courage and love
reflecting the life of Jesus,
through whom your glory shines
in the most unexpected ways. **Amen.**

Prayer of Confession

The presence of God surrounds us, and yet too often we go about our daily lives oblivious to the power of the Holy Spirit moving in our midst. Let us together confess the ways in which we are blind to God’s ever-present care and love.

God of rainbows and puddles,
Lover of snow showers and clear blue skies,
we confess to you and to one another
the many ways we fail to live the lives you want for us.
We make ourselves busy with many things,

and neglect to listen to your voice.
All too often we see the worst in the world around us,
and look past your signs of hope.
We are quick to voice our dissent with one another,
and refuse to see your face in the persons with whom we disagree.
We focus on our own hurts, anger, and disappointments,
and close our hearts to your transforming grace.

O Holy Light of the world, forgive us.
Open our eyes to your endless possibilities.
Give us courage to listen for your call to us.
Take our hearts of stone, and make them new again with your holy love. Amen.

Assurance of Pardon (2 Peter 1:19)

Do not be afraid. God's light has come into the world and has scattered the darkness; the morning star rises in our hearts. Rejoice! For God does not hold our mistakes against us, but embraces us as God's own beloved. Amen

Hymn Sing to the Lord a joyful song MP 929

Bible readings: **2 Kings 2:1-12**
 Mark 9:2-9

Today is Transfiguration Sunday. I have to say, I wasn't very enthused when I realised that! I felt like I didn't really have anything new to say about the transfiguration. And what does this rather strange story have to tell us today in the 21st century? But I read a commentary that places this event firmly in Mark's gospel, in fact as one of the key events in Mark's gospel, in a way that I had never thought about before, and it links with what we were talking about two weeks ago about Mark's Gospel being an apocalyptic battleground – a battle between good and evil.

Mark's gospel is definitely apocalyptic. While the apocalypse is usually associated with total destruction and the end of the world, it can also be a prophetic revelation, especially concerning a cataclysm, a violent event or upheaval, in which the forces of good permanently triumph over the forces of evil. Apocalyptic literature is a bit different and there's a lot of it in the Bible. The word apocalypse comes from the Greek word for revelation or disclosure. Apocalyptic literature is a literary genre in which a supernatural being reveals cosmic mysteries or the nature of the future to a human intermediary. The means of mediation include dreams, visions and heavenly journeys, and they typically feature symbolic imagery drawn from the Hebrew Bible. The transfiguration has much of this – a vision with Moses and Elijah, important figures, long-since dead, from the Hebrew Bible and the supernatural being is the voice of God.

The biblical scholar Ched Myers sees the Transfiguration Sunday text as one of the three pillars of Mark's apocalyptic Gospel. There are three revelatory events in Mark - the baptism

of Jesus, the transfiguration of Jesus, and the crucifixion of Jesus all of which include similar features. These three can be seen as foundational for Mark's way of understanding how the gospel of Jesus Christ relates to Jesus' own preaching of the gospel of God in announcing God's reign. In short, Jesus **is** the gospel, yet that gospel has as its horizon God's purposes for the world.

Let's look at the three events and see what they have in common:

When Jesus is baptised in chapter 1, the heavens are torn apart, a dove descends, there is a voice from heaven saying "You are my Son, the beloved" and some think of John the Baptist as Elijah. In the transfiguration, clothes turn a brilliant white, clouds descend, there is a voice from the cloud saying "This is my Son, the beloved", and Moses appears with Elijah. In the crucifixion scene in chapter 15, the curtain of the temple is torn in two, darkness descends over the land, there is a loud voice, this time of Jesus, the centurion declares Jesus is the Son of God, and people say Jesus is calling for Elijah.

Each event has these similar elements – something is torn or changed, there is the voice of God, Jesus is proclaimed as the Son of God and Elijah is present or alluded to.

Elijah, of course was a great prophet and miracle worker of the Hebrew scriptures, recognised as a prophet by everyone. As we've already noted, some people thought John the Baptist was Elijah, and some also thought Jesus was Elijah come again to save the Jewish people.

But the point here is not so much the similarities of these three events, but the consistent apocalyptic character of these three defining moments for Mark's narrative. In the beginning, middle, and end of his Gospel, Mark highlights three revealing moments in an apocalyptic way. We, as readers, have the good fortune to witness all three and gain privileged knowledge in Mark's narrative. We become insiders to the mysterious disclosure of Mark's gospel, even when the disciples fail to understand. Thanks to comparing these three events, we see the familiar story of the transfiguration in a decidedly apocalyptic light. It is no accident that this story takes place on a mountain. Mountains are places of epiphany or revelation throughout the Bible, but especially in the story of Moses.

Anthropologists often tell us that mountains are places of meeting between heaven and earth, and many ancient peoples considered mountains sacred – think of Mt Fuji in Japan, or the various sacred mountains for aboriginal people in Australia.

From an apocalyptic perspective, it can be helpful to note that what is revealed is a mystery: something deeply true yet still in the process of becoming revealed – that Jesus is the Son of God. When we introduce this dynamic of present mystery and future disclosure, the apocalyptic tension of the transfiguration story comes out clearly. Jesus's garments turn

dazzlingly white beyond anything earthly washing methods could produce – even Daz! The great figures of Israel's past, Moses and Elijah, join as cameos in a conversation with Jesus. Peter is so overwhelmed he wants to build dwellings for all three of them, though he does this because he is terrified (apocalypses feature a lot of very fearful human witnesses). And just when you think you can't outdo this apocalyptic picture, a cloud of divine presence overshadows them all and speaks. We notice that the voice speaks familiar words from Mark's first apocalyptic scene in chapter 1: "my beloved Son." This second revealing event on the mountain is a confirmation of the one at Jesus's baptism. A crucial difference is that God speaks directly to Jesus, saying, "**You** are my Son, the Beloved." In Mark 9:7, however, the disclosure is spoken directly to the three disciples: "**This** is my Son, the Beloved." And then comes the most important part: "Listen to him." Apocalyptic visions give you a lot to see, but this one also gives you something it really wants you and the three disciples to hear: "Listen to him." This is the most important part of the whole story – that we are to listen to what Jesus says.

Visions are not mere visual spectacles but pictures that move us toward action. When we looked at Jesus casting out demons earlier in Mark's gospel, we spoke about how his example should lead us to action – to resistance against modern-day demons. The sense here in Mark 9:2–9 is different but just as decisively oriented towards action.

We need to bear in mind that the mountain epiphany of the transfiguration is surrounded (sandwiched) by two nearly failed healings - Jesus Cures a Blind Man at Bethsaida in 8:22–26, where Jesus needs two attempts for the man to be able to see properly and fully, and the Healing of a Boy with a Spirit in 9:14–29, where the disciples try to heal a boy possessed by a spirit and are unable to – Jesus has to complete the healing. With these two healing stories, Jesus has to intervene a second time to produce the expected result. The young boy's father may be baffled with the disciples' inability to heal the boy with the spirit just after they come off the mountain, but Jesus completes it and reminds them that this kind of spirit can only "come out through prayer."

The revelation on the mountain is important to strengthen the action of the disciples (and us) when healings start going wrong and require a second laying on of hands or ardent prayer. Think of the healing examples as life in general – when things go wrong and we have to try again. The point is that the vision serves to strengthen such practice in the face of suffering and pain, or healings gone awry.

There is a way of describing the kind of practice-oriented tension that all apocalyptic literature provides, the tension between living now and looking to the future – you could say "where the sweet by and by meets the nasty here and now." An apocalyptic vision like

Mark's in 9:2–9 is a revelation designed to buttress our discipleship and to keep it from slipping up when glory looks so much sweeter and failure so much more likely.

And isn't that just what the church in Europe needs to see and hear? What the URC needs to see and hear in the post-pandemic apathy and real-life disappointment of declining and aging congregations, of not enough ministers and volunteers to go around? Maybe what we need is a true vision of God's purpose in Jesus and a brief command to go: "listen to him." But it is not enough to simply listen; we must try to live our lives according to what Jesus says and does. The transfiguration may seem like an unrealistic, slightly strange story that we don't really understand, but seen in the wider context of Mark's Gospel and how it gradually reveals who Jesus really is, it is another signal of Jesus's power and glory and the need to learn from him and follow him.

Hymn Love divine, all loves excelling MP 449

LORD'S SUPPER

We remember, as we do at every communion service, the gift of the life and death of God's Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Come to this table, you who are beloved in Christ. Come, not because you must, but because you may.

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give our thanks and praise.

It is indeed right to give you our thanks and praise, O God,
for your transfiguring light has overcome us
and is restoring within us the image of your glory.
When you created the universe you said,
"Let light shine out of darkness,"
and the heavens lit up in testimony to your justice.
Through the law and prophets your light has shone forth,
and your Word has never fallen silent.
On a high mountain you pulled back the veil of heaven
and, as Moses and Elijah passed on their mantles
to the one in whom your saving Word is fulfilled,
you allowed the incomparable glory of your Son
to be seen by his terrified disciples.
He was killed by those who would not listen to you,
but after you raised him from the dead,
you sent the winds of heaven upon us
with an extravagant outpouring of your Holy Spirit.
And so in gratitude we join with all your people
on earth and in heaven, in joyful praise, saying:
Holy, holy, holy Lord
God of power and might,
heaven and earth are full of your glory.
Hosanna in the highest.

**Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest.**

This is the mystery of faith:

Christ has died

Christ is risen

Christ will come again.

Lord God, send your Holy Spirit upon this bread and wine,
and upon your people, that Christ may be with us,
and we may be ready to live for you
and do what you ask of us, today and every day to come. **Amen**

On the night when he was betrayed, Jesus took bread and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, this is my body which is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me. In the same way he took the cup after supper saying, this cup is the new covenant in my blood, Do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Sharing of bread and wine

Prayer after communion

Most gracious God, we thank you for what you have given us.
You have fed us with the bread of life and renewed us for your service.
Now we give ourselves to you, and ask that our daily living
may be part of the life of your kingdom, and that our love may be your love
reaching out into the life of the world, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

Prayers of intercession

God, our heavenly parent, working through human events to show your presence and strength,
work through each of us as we seek to respond to your call to serve.
Let us walk: **In the light of the Lord.**

Almighty God, shine in our lives like you do in the universe, maintaining life, order, balance and
forever making new creations. Mend us as needed, bend us as necessary, that we may be your
new creation, in body, mind and spirit.
Let us walk: **In the light of the Lord.**

Holy Spirit, put your seal upon us that we may be filled with zeal for God's work through us as God's
agents of reconciliation and peace.
Let us walk: **In the light of the Lord.**

Lord Jesus Christ, when we do not know what to do when we are overwhelmed by God's
intervention in our lives, give us the wisdom to listen, to marvel, and to renew our commitment to
follow you all the days of our lives.
Let us walk: **In the light of the Lord.**

Transfigure your world as you transfigure your church, O God,
that all may be made new and whole.
Let us walk: **In the light of the Lord.**

We pray for all who have needs beyond our human power to meet, knowing that you,
alone God, are the Great Physician. We name in our hearts those known to us in our families,
communities and churches who need your healing love at this time. **SILENCE**
Let us walk: **In the light of the Lord.**

The Bridgwater Drive Church, 11 Feb. 2024

Lord, just as the disciples were changed by their experiences
we too are changed and transformed into the image of Christ by your mercy.
Grant us unveiled faces that reflect your love, your hope, and your light in the world. Amen

Our Father....

Hymn Shine, Jesus shine MP 445

Blessing

Go now, and speak of what you have seen of God's glory.
Do not cling to the holy moments when heaven overshadows you,
but as the Lord lives, listen to Christ and follow him
from the places of revelation to the places of mission.
And may God shine the light of glory into your hearts.
May Christ be with you and never leave you.
And may the Spirit renew the image of God within you.

The Bridgwater Drive Church sung Blessing.

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