



27 February – 05 March 2022

THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

The story of the transfiguration appears in all three of the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke). Its purpose is to confirm, in the moments before Jesus starts his journey to the cross, that he really is God's Messiah, the incarnate God, and the one who establishes God's Reign among human beings. It is a watershed moment in these Gospels, because from this point on, Jesus predicts his death a number of times, and moves inexorably toward Jerusalem where that death will occur. The startling truth about Jesus' Messiahship is not that he revealed God's glory, but that an inherent part of this revelation was his death. All the Gospels agree that God's glory shines most clearly through Jesus on the cross. And for us God's glory shines most clearly through grace, compassion, forgiveness, and justice brought to those who are broken, marginalised and oppressed by sin and by human systems of power.

This moment also links to the start of Jesus' ministry. At the beginning of the season after the Epiphany, we explored Jesus' baptism. There are a number of parallels between that moment and this one. In both, God's glory is seen. In both, God's voice is heard. In both, Jesus is declared to be the fulfilment of God's promise to save humanity and establish God's Reign. The baptism was the start of the work of Jesus' life. The transfiguration is the start of the work of Jesus' death. And both of these moments were affirmations from God that would carry Jesus through great trials – the baptism for the trial of the wilderness temptation, and the transfiguration for the trial of the cross. In these last few days of Epiphany, and into the beginning of Lent we will explore the glory of God and how it sustained Jesus and can sustain us.

SUNDAY 27 FEBRUARY 2022

Read: Luke 9:28-43

Reflect: The passage that is set for today can stop at verse 36 or can extend through to verse 43. The longer version offers some wonderful insights into this significant moment in Jesus' life. In the actual transfiguration moment, only three disciples get to witness what happened, but for them God's confirmation of Jesus as the Promised One is undeniable. The appearance of Moses and Elijah shows Jesus as the one who fulfills the promise of both the law (Moses) and the prophets (Elijah). It shows Jesus as the ultimate reflection of God's glory, beyond even the law and the prophets. So, for us, this moment confirms what Jesus says in John's Gospel, that whoever has seen him has seen God.

Following this moment, Jesus returns to the other disciples to find them very frustrated because they have failed to drive the demon out of a boy. As Jesus completes the healing, he reveals God's glory again – but this time to everyone. Also, the compassionate, gracious, and restorative nature of God's glory is disclosed.

God's glory is not just about bright lights and smoke. It's not just about loud voices and thunder. It's not just about demonstrations of power and conquest of evil forces. In fact, most of the time when the Bible describes God's glory in this way, it's because the writers are struggling for words and images to describe the truth of their experiences. In this passage, though, another, more practical and transforming aspect of God's glory is shown. God's glory is about all things being brought to unity and wholeness through the love, grace, and justice of God. This is the glory of God that Jesus revealed.

How do you see God's glory at work in your life today?

Do: The practice of praise is very effective for opening our hearts to acknowledge the glory and presence of God around us. Today, at every opportunity, look for reasons to praise God, and then do it!

Pray: For your glory which is constantly at work in my life, O God, I praise you.

MONDAY 28 FEBRUARY 2022

Read: Psalm 35:11-28

Reflect: Psalm 35 is from the first book in the Bible's Psalm collection. This book contains Psalms that are almost all attributed to David, many of which are laments, crying out to God in times of struggle. Today's Psalm is no different. It is written in two sections, both of which begin with long descriptions of the suffering the Psalmist is experiencing along with a plea for God's help. Then, at the end of each section is a short affirmation of God's goodness and a commitment to praise God. Today's reading is the second section.

It may seem strange to be reading a Psalm about such persecution and suffering just after the celebration of the transfiguration, but it is appropriate for two reasons. Firstly, the Gospels all link Jesus' transfiguration with his coming death. In many ways, Jesus must have felt a lot like this Psalmist, yet, through it all he affirmed God's greatness and justice, and committed to praise God in spite of the pain. The affirmation that came at the transfiguration enabled Jesus to endure his suffering. Secondly, God's glory is seen in the suffering of Christ. The glory of transfiguration is not different from the glory of the cross. It is an integral part of it. It was only Jesus' faithfulness to the sacrificial, gracious, and loving purpose of God that enabled him to reflect God's glory. In a similar way, there is a glimpse of God's grace and goodness in the compassion of this Psalmist who trusts God in suffering and prays for his persecutors.

How can you find glory in the midst of your struggles today?

Do: The practice of lament may not seem to be a very glorious one, but when we can pour out our grievances to God, and commit to trust and worship God in spite of our struggles, something of God's grace and goodness shines through us. Today, whenever you face difficulties, use the practice of lament to strengthen your awareness of God's glory and presence.

Pray: In the midst of my grief and struggle I trust you and I worship you, O God of Glory.

TUESDAY 01 MARCH 2022

Read: Ezekiel 1:1 – 2:1

Reflect: Ezekiel was one of the exiles who had been carried into Babylon. As a priest he would have been devastated at the destruction of the Temple because of its importance for his people, but also because it represented his life's work, which was now meaningless. With no Temple, there was no need for priests. But then, one day in his thirtieth year, when he would have begun his priestly ministry, he received this glorious and frightening vision of God's glory. So many of the images he described were familiar to him because they were part of the Temple. The angelic beings were like the cherubim carved on to the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies – which was believed to be God's throne on earth. But, this time, they are alive, covered with eyes, and able to move freely in all directions. These images were metaphors for God's omniscience and omnipresence. In a land in which Ezekiel had felt abandoned by God, the knowledge that God could see all and was present everywhere would have been healing and restoring for him.

But then, God speaks to Ezekiel, which would have been even more startling. In those days, the people believed that if anyone saw God he or she would die. Ezekiel was not expecting a conversation with God. He was expecting to be consumed by God's glory. But the message here, like in Jesus' transfiguration, is that, when God reveals God's Self to us, it is to draw us into communion with God.

In what ways is God revealing God's Self to you today? How can you allow this to draw you into deeper communion with God?

Do: The truth is we don't have to go far to see God's glory. God is constantly revealing God's Self in so many ways – through creation, through other people, through circumstances, through moments of joy or insight or challenge. All we need to do to recognise God's glory is to be become aware. Today, take time to stop, observe and notice God's presence all around you.

Pray: O God, wherever I am you see me, and wherever I go you are always with me.

ASH WEDNESDAY 02 MARCH 2022

Read: Isaiah 58:1-12

Reflect: Today is Ash Wednesday, the start of Lent. After the last few weeks in which we have seen God's glory revealed in Jesus, we now spend forty days preparing ourselves for the ultimate display of God's glory – the cross. Traditionally Lent was a period of teaching and preparation for new believers who were to be baptised on Easter Sunday, and for long-time followers of Jesus who would reaffirm their baptismal vows. Now, baptisms happen throughout the year, but we still need times of reflection and preparation like this in which we engage in self-examination and repentance – identifying where we need to change, and being intentional about becoming more Christlike. The three disciplines of fasting, giving and prayer are the tools that enable us to do this work.

Today's reading, from Isaiah, shows what happens when worship is self-centred, seeks to manipulate God, and resists the work of repentance. God is not pleased with these "spiritual games" and calls God's people to a spirituality that is lived daily in the practicalities of life – treating one another with justice, grace, and compassion. The prophet makes it clear that when the people refuse to live according to God's values and principles, they cannot expect to experience God's goodness. But, when we follow Jesus into lives of service and love, then we automatically know the joy, peace, and abundant life of Christ. This is what the Lenten season seeks to do in us – draw us deeper into this Christ-following life.

How will you do the work of repentance this Lent?

Do: Three practices always feature especially strongly during Lent: Fasting (not just "giving something up"), Giving (of our time, talents and treasures) and prayer (especially for others). Today take some time to decide how you will practice these disciplines in the next forty days.

Pray: Teach me, Jesus, to make my faith a true and practical following of your ways, and not just lip service.

THURSDAY 03 MARCH 2022

Read: Exodus 5:10-23

Reflect: When God called Moses to be God's agent of liberation for the enslaved Israelites, Moses was reluctant. Perhaps he had a sense of how difficult this job would be. I doubt, though, that he expected the immediately negative impact it would have on his countrymen and women. When he approached Pharaoh with the request to let the people go three days into the wilderness to worship God, Pharaoh decided that the Israelites were lazy and needed to be made to work harder. So, he informed the Egyptian foremen to stop supplying straw for the manufacture of bricks. The Israelites would now have to find straw for themselves, but still produce the same number of bricks each day. Needless to say, they were angry with Moses for upsetting the apple cart and making their lives more miserable than they were before. Moses' response, understandably, was to cry out to God, asking why God was not doing anything to rescue God's people.

It is not uncommon, when we start to take God's call seriously, for it to feel like things get worse before they get better. Often our new concern for compassion and justice sets us at odds with those who see no need to look beyond their own agendas and desires. Our quest to be more loving and inclusive can create conflict with those who prefer exclusivity. And, as we learn this new way of living, even those we try to help may be suspicious or get hurt by the consequences of our well-intentioned actions. At these times it can be tempting to give up following Jesus and working to manifest God's Reign. But, as with Moses in the verses following today's reading, God always promises to work in and through us, if we will just stay faithful.

What changes do you need to stay faithful to in your following of Jesus today?

Do: Prayer is a strengthening and encouraging gift in those times when we are trying to do God's work, but we feel like we're failing. When we can cry out to God and open our hearts to receive God's wisdom and strength, we are able to stay faithful, and return to our quest for holiness with renewed commitment. Try praying in this way today.

Pray: When my faith journey becomes rocky and painful, O God, please help and strengthen me.

FRIDAY 04 MARCH 2022

Read: Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16

Reflect: You may recognise some of the words in today's Psalm. The Tempter in the wilderness quoted verses 11 and 12, when he took Jesus to the top of the Temple and encouraged him to jump off as a demonstration of power. Jesus' response to this temptation (which is part of Sunday's Gospel reading) is an important guide for how to understand this Psalm. He refused to deliberately put himself in danger and proclaimed that we are not to put God to the test.

Psalm 91 has sometimes been seen as a magical guarantee of safety and protection from any of life's threats. However, it doesn't take much to realise that such complete safety is not the experience of any human being on this planet - not even those who hold on to this passage with the greatest faith. So, how are we to understand what is being said here? I believe two elements of background can help us.

Psalm 91 is one of the introductory Psalms for the fourth book of the Psalter. In Book 3, one of the primary themes is the failure of the human monarchy in Israel. Now, in Book 4, there is the assurance of God's leadership and care. The idea is to contrast the weakness of human security with the solidity of God's protection. This is the first point to consider. The second point is that this Psalm was probably meant to be addressed to the community, not to individuals. God's protection is offered to God's people as a whole. As the community lives faithfully in relationship with God, individuals can know security through their connection with the community. The heart of the promise, though, is in verse 15 where God says, "I will be with you". It's not that troubles won't come, but that God's presence will sustain and lead us even in the worst of times.

How can you experience the security that comes from being part of God's family, and living in God's presence?

Do: In the Reign of God, to which we are called, God's promises are always experienced in community. Today, open yourself to God's care and protection by spending time with other God-seekers.

Pray: As I find my place among your people, O God, I find security and sustenance for my journey.

SATURDAY 05 MARCH 2022

Read: John 12:27-36

Reflect: Last week we read about Jesus' transfiguration and spoke about how this experience sustained Jesus through his time of suffering. Today's reading is John's version of a transfiguration-like event in Jesus' life. The context is Jesus' grief over his coming death, and his desire to be delivered from it. In the end, though, like in the Gethsemane of the other Gospels, Jesus recognises that God's glory will only really be revealed on the cross, and so he accepts what is to come. It is in the act of acceptance that Jesus hears God's affirming voice. And then, after teaching the crowds about the need to live as people of light, he withdraws to be alone and prepare for his coming ordeal.

The key message in this short teaching of Jesus is that, when we walk in the light, the darkness cannot overtake us. Jesus demonstrated the truth of these words in his temptation experience in the wilderness (which we will read about tomorrow). It was his deep connection with God (the Light) that enabled him to recognise and resist the temptations that came his way. In the same way, we can find life and strength to navigate life's struggles if we will remain deeply connected to God and God's ways.

How can you renew your commitment to God today?

Do: Acts of commitment and dedication are always significant. They often mark a turning point in our lives, and they can feel like once-off moments. But the truth is that we can – and must – renew our commitment to follow Jesus daily. A simple, daily act of awareness and dedication can be an amazing source of strength throughout the day. Try it today.

Pray: Whatever may come today, O God, I dedicate myself to you.