**14th February 2021**

A gathering prayer

Almighty God,
we ask you to show us something more of who you are
and how awesome your presence is.
Overcome our fear of the unknown,
and lead us into a new experience of you.
May our worship today be as on a mountain-top,
a transforming encounter that empowers our discipleship.
Amen.



A prayer of adoration

God of divine power,
what a spine-tingling, hair-raising event the disciples experienced!
One minute they were looking upon Jesus, the man.
Next, they were tuned into your glory shining in and through him
as he transformed before their eyes:
your confirmation of his deity.
God of life-changing moments, we glorify you.

Your same radiant light,
available to us through relationship with Jesus your Son,
transforms our hearts.
God of life-changing moments, we glorify you.

Your divine Holy Spirit tunes our faith in unexpected ways
through the transforming radiance of your love.
God of life-changing moments, we glorify you.
Amen.



Prayers of penitence

A prayer of confession

Lord, whereas it’s part of our faith walk to seek
and be open to life-changing moments,
forgive us when we just plod through life
and get despondent with the mundane.
We are sorry, Lord.
Shine on us, we pray.

On the other hand,
we can at times get fixated on the spiritual mountain-tops
and so miss out on what’s happening below in the everyday.
When things are going well for us,
we can get wrapped up in the moment and be forgetful of others.
We’re sorry, Lord.
Shine on us, we pray.

There are many voices tuned into today’s world
telling us how to live and what’s best.
But you, Lord, are our authority in life.
Forgive us when we fail to test things against your word.
We’re sorry, Lord.
Shine on us, we pray.
Amen.

Assurance of forgiveness

Jesus’ divine nature was confirmed on the mountain
– he is God’s beloved Son.
He went on to suffer;
he died and rose again for us, conquering sin and death.
Now he sits at God’s right hand, glorified in heaven
– and thanks to him, we are completely forgiven.
Amen.

**Mark 9.2-9**

Its Valentine’s Day today. Love is all around us: well, it’s been a bit difficult to find romantic love in this pandemic. In the old days you could spot someone across a crowded bar, get chatting, take their number, meet up for cocktails or coffees and then see what happens.

Most young people didn't think they’d be spending their prime years swiping endlessly on dating apps, answering, "How's lockdown treating you?

I saw an article on the news last night about a couple who had met online, through dating apps, and then met for walks in the park and had now got engaged. I don’t know what the rules are for those who are engaged. Are they allowed to forgo social distancing? Can they walk side by side, never mind kiss?

I read an article about using dating apps: for the purposes of research for this sermon I may quickly add!

Dating and relationship specialist Ella Stearn[[1]](#endnote-1) gave top tips for getting the most out of dating apps, including how to do yourself justice with your profile.

She said ‘Beware group photos. Group pictures show that you're "sociable and you like to spend time with friends and family," But you need to choose them carefully. Depending on who else is in the photo, it can be surprisingly hard to tell who you are’.

Presumably if you are worried about your image, choosing who else is in the picture is also key! You don’t want your parents in, or your great Aunty Ethel!

"You could blur out the others, that’s one solution," says Ella.

But what photos should you use?

"You want your pictures to show not tell’, says Ella. ‘If you like travel, don't just write on your profile 'I like to travel'. Instead, use those pictures to show your favourite travel photos," she says.

Presumably not of your lockdown trip to Weston Super Mere?

"If you're comfortable taking a photo of yourself, take it. It's just about being confident and being happy in who you are.'It's your CV for your love life'

Pictures sorted, now on to the words. Ella's top tips: her dos and don'ts.

* Try to you avoid using overused phrases. "I always see guys listing their pros and cons, or saying 'I'm not Ryan Gosling'."
* "The worst is 'ask me anything'. It's like, 'I don't want to ask you something if you've got nothing to tell me!'"
* What does work, according to Ella, is something "short, snappy, and original". Something with "a bit of personality".

She concludes by saying: "There's been such a rise in intentional dating, with more people looking for something serious because they're reminded of the value of human connection. And, of course, people have so much more free time. Just imagine how amazing it will be when you can date these people properly and meet up with them in real life."

Well, we all hope we can meet up soon in real life.

Today is Transfiguration Sunday and the bible passage is set on a high mountain where Jesus takes Peter, James, and John. Jesus’ three closest disciples experience a transfiguring revelation that changes the way they see the world and reveals the glory and love of God for us. It’s a snapshot, a picture, of a different reality.

In scripture God met Elijah (1 Kings 19.8) and Moses (Exodus 19.3) on a mountain top. And the revelation could not have come at a more appropriate time. Jesus has just turned the disciples’ thinking upside down. Peter finds words to articulate who Jesus is: ‘You are the Messiah’ (8.29), Jesus accepts this, but then tells them of his forthcoming suffering and death. He fiercely rebukes Peter’s incredulity (8.33), but the disciples must have found it impossible to grasp this unimaginable future. Suddenly, there is tragedy ahead, but the glory of Jesus’ true being is also revealed to them.

This story is told from the perspective of the disciples. They see Jesus changed in ways they can only describe by saying that his clothes became brilliantly white. They see two of the greatest figures from the history of Israel speaking to Jesus as equals. And they are terrified! Peter stammers out words that reveal his yearning for this moment to go on forever. He must have regretted the words as soon as they left his mouth – yet what words could be adequate to this experience?

On this mountain-top, he wants to find the resources to build dwellings, so that they can stay together as God stayed with the people in the tabernacle in the desert. It was never going to happen that way; this was a moment of fleeting brilliance. But human beings yearn to embody their faith in bricks and mortar, and many of our churches bear witness to this passion to give concrete expression to our moments of wonder. How can we balance our glimpses of God’s glory with our desire for stability?

Peter’s stumbling words are eclipsed by the voice of God. Cloud comes down on the mountain – Jewish tradition linked cloud and the glory of God (Exodus 40.34) – and from the cloud, God speaks. God’s words at Jesus’ baptism (1.11) were spoken to Jesus, but these are addressed to the disciples. ‘This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!’

God’s voice gives the disciples the words to make sense of what they have seen – this has happened because Jesus really is the Son of God – and they are reassured that they should listen to him.

Finally, as they return to ‘real life’ at the foot of the mountain, Jesus tells them to share this with no one, picking up on Mark’s theme of secrecy until the full revelation of Jesus’ identity in the crucifixion.

Transfiguration is a wow moment. A peek into a different reality. A revealing of a true reality. It’s like God’s dating app. Look at who I am, look at what reality is really like – you interested?

We sometimes hear people talk about a ‘mountaintop’ experience. A moment when they experience something transcendent, other-worldly – something that transforms the way that they see and understand the day-to-day world around them. Perhaps you have had such an experience? If you have, did you tell anyone about it afterwards?

We assume that most people in our society don’t think about God and aren’t interested in faith. They get on with life, most living comfortably without the need for God. But every now and again, moments of transfiguration may happen, that reveal a different reality to the material world and mundane life that we all live in day by day.

It is interesting to reflect on people’s outlook on life. Some people see life as harsh and unrelenting? Everything is a struggle, the world, God (if He exists) is against you and this pandemic is further confirmation of your worst suspicions that life is hard, and you just had to grin and bear it as best you can.

Others see reality as just indifferent. It is random chance what happens to us, there is no guiding hand behind all this. This is all there is, and some will get lucky and some will be unlucky in life. Its just one of those things.

Finally, others will see reality as being benign, that behind all things is goodness and love and despite what life may throw up and the struggles we must go through, there is a benign force behind reality. For Christians of course we see that as God, God who is love. Every now and again we are touched by God’s love, God’s benign guiding hand and presence in the world. Moments get transfigured. We go ‘wow’. We see and experience stuff that convinces us that the voice that spoke over Jesus, speaks over us: ‘You are loved’.

This pandemic has given us the chance to experience God through unexpected acts of kindness, as neighbours are asked to look out for the vulnerable people around them, as churches and community organisations have responded to requests for help. When have unexpected human actions transfigured the world and allowed you to see God more clearly? When do you think that your actions might have shown God to others?

Peter, James, and John were told not to tell anyone about what they had seen on the mountain. Nevertheless, the Gospel account itself shows us that, after Jesus’ ascension, the story of what happened on the mountain was shared as the disciples sought to understand who Jesus was and what had happened.

Peter James and John of course also went with Jesus into the Garden of Gethsemane when they experienced the love of God shine out of Jesus through the trial of crucifixion and the temptation not to take the cup of suffering, not to die for the sins of the world and offer forgiveness and reconciliation to all humanity. ‘Take this cup away from me’ said Jesus. ‘But not my will but yours be done’, he prayed. This is one of the prayers that our Lenten studies into the Prayers of Jesus will explore in the United Services and the Lent discussion groups, starting during this coming week. Both in Gethsemane and on the Mount of Transfiguration, Peter, James and John got an insight into the deep reality behind the universe: the love of God for God’s creation, and Gods desire to do whatever, to draw others into that love and reconciliation with all things.

Many of us long for an experience of God that is spectacular and beyond any doubting, but it is worth noting that only three of the 12 disciples were invited to witness this transfiguration. And the call on their lives was not to dwell on it, or to stay on the mountaintop in the tents Peter offered to set up, but to live with the rest of the disciples in the mundane and ordinary and messy world. And to live with the knowledge that there was something so much more that they were a part of, something that they could not forget.

And to do that, to live in the mundane and ordinary and messy world with the knowledge that there is something greater that we are all part of, is truly life transforming.

CS Lewis in his last book[[2]](#endnote-2), after the tragic death of his wife wrote this:

*We do not want merely to see beauty, though God knows even that is bounty enough. We want something else which can hardly be put into words – to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it … That is why the poets tell us such lovely falsehoods. They talk as if the west wind could really sweep into a human soul; but it can’t. They tell us that ‘beauty born of murmuring’ will pass into a human face; but it won’t. Or not yet. For if we take the imagery of scripture seriously, if we believe that God will one day give us the Morning Star and cause us to put on the splendour of the sun, then we may surmise that both the ancient myths and the modern poetry, so false as history, may be very near the truth as prophecy.*

*At present we are on the outside of the world, the wrong side of the door. We discern the freshness and purity of the morning, but they do not make us fresh and pure. We cannot mingle with splendours we see. But all the leaves of the New Testament are rustling with the rumour that it will not always be so. Someday, God willing, we shall get in. When human souls have become as perfect in voluntary obedience as the inanimate creation is in its lifeless obedience, then they will put on its glory, or rather that greater glory of which nature is only the first sketch.*

You see Love is all around us. Look for signs of God’s glory in everyday life.

There was a lovely prayer by Ian Fosten in the URC Prayer Handbook this week, which we reflected on at our prayer meetings on Tuesdays and Thursdays.:

Dear God, in my thankfulness this day may I not overlook how frequently your remarkable gift of love is found in actions that are small and commonplace.

May I receive love in a welcoming smile, and return it that way too;

May moments of patient waiting give time to hold others, fondly, in my thoughts;

May necessary journeys and routine tasks be seen as space and time to think, pray and give;

May I learn afresh that love in practice need not be always worthy and purposeful but sometimes may be frivolous and fun!

May you live transfigured lives: knowing the deep reality of the love of God behind all things

Prayers of intercession

God of glory,
open our eyes and open our hearts.
Help us to see Jesus.

God of glory,
change us and renew us by your Spirit.
Make us more like Jesus

God of glory,
we see you in the beauty of the universe,
we meet you in the love of our friends and families,
we find you in our joys and in our pain –
faithful and true.
We see you revealed to us in Scripture,
we hear you speaking to us in the silence,
we know you in our hearts,
and we find you in the person of Jesus.
As we look at the events in our world,
help us to see where you are at work.
In our homes and in our daily lives,
help us to notice the glimpses of your glory
shining through the ordinary fabric of our lives.
You are the God who comes close to us:
though we are far apart from each other
Surround us with the light of your presence.

God of glory,
we live with so many uncertainties.
Today we pray for people whose lives are always uncertain:
for people in war torn parts of the world;
for all who wonder where their next meal will come from;
for people who are jobless or homeless;
for all who are fleeing from domestic violence.
Help us to make our churches sanctuaries of peace and safety.
May we be ready to respond to the need of others
and to do what we can to tell the story
of the love that will never let us go,
the love that can change us and the world.
Help us to love one another as you have loved us.
You are the God who comes close to us:
though we are far apart from each other
Surround us with the light of your presence.

God of glory,
we pray for situations in the world that need hope and healing.
And in particular for Yemen, for Russia, and for Myanmar.
We ask for words and actions that are full of hope and not hate,
of forgiveness and unity and not division.
May we all be mindful of the power of our words,
and use our speaking to build others up, not to tear them down.
When conflict comes may our words be controlled and kind,
and may we always shine a light of truth in the darkness of discord and lies.
As a second impeachment trial begins in the United States,
we ask that the truth would be told and honoured.
We pray for all who work in communications and the media,
that they would report with honesty and integrity,
and that they would use their roles to speak truth to power.
This week, may we seek to respond to the needs of others
with messages, words and actions of hope and comfort.
You are the God who comes close to us:
though we are far apart from each other
Surround us with the light of your presence.

God of glory,
we thank you for the tireless effort of nurses, doctors and consultants,
caring for patients, especially those who are suffering from Covid-19.
We ask that you would give all medical staff peace as they care for the sick,
and peace as many of them wait at the bedside of those who are at the end of life.
We thank you that the ordinary tasks of routine, order and gentleness
can bless the boundary between life and death.
As discussions begin about a future return to school,
we pray that the needs of children and young people would be central to the thinking.
We pray for all who have been kept apart from those they love;
for those who have not been able to mourn for friends and family who have died,
and we pray especially for relatives of people in care homes –
surround them all with your healing presence.
We remember people in our own communities who are suffering
asking that you would lighten the pain and distress of daily life.
You are the God who comes close to us:
though we are far apart from each other
Surround us with the light of your presence.

God of glory, open our eyes and open our hearts.
Help us to see Jesus.

God of glory, Teresa Maychange us and renew us by your Spirit.
Make us more like Jesus. Amen.



A sending out prayer

Lord Jesus, raise our expectations
of what it means to encounter God
not just in this place but in every place,
in all the places we shall be in the days ahead.
Help us every day to discover something new
about God’s ways, about what God wants of us –
and change the way we see the world,
and the way we act.
Amen.

1. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/newsbeat-56011729 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. C. S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory,” in The Weight of Glory: And Other Addresses (New York: HarperCollins, 1949/2001), 42-3 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)