**27th February 2022**

**Luke 9.28-43**

**The Transfiguration**

**Call to worship**

We are called to love our enemies.
Memories are important to us.
There are many people who have gone before us,
they are the pillars of our faith;
and Jesus is our greatest example.
Let us come together to worship him today.



**A gathering prayer**

God, thank you that, as we journey with you,
you are transforming us.
Thank you for the mountaintop experiences
as well as the everyday journeys.
We ask to know your presence and your power
as we live each day for you.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of approach**

Lord, we approach you
as people climbing your holy mountain,
hoping to meet with you there.
May we be changed by our encounter.
May we be strengthened to face the world
with renewed courage and faith.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of adoration**

Lord of change,
of transfiguration and transformation,
yet whose essence remains always the same,
we worship and adore you,
and we kneel in awe before you.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness**

**A prayer of confession**

Father, we confess that we are always desperate
for mountaintop experiences.
**We want our faith to be fuelled by awe and excitement.**

We admit that our faith becomes jaded
when life is difficult or just mundane.
**We want to feel spiritually uplifted all the time.**

Forgive us, Father, for failing to keep the faith
when we descend from the mountain.
**Forgive us for failing you when everyday life returns.**

**We recommit ourselves to walking with you
every inch of the way, every moment of the day,
whether it be fair or foul,
knowing that you will be faithful to us
even when we lack faith in you.
Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

O God of all patience and forgiveness, thank you for bearing with us when in your grace you grant us spiritual highs but to our pleasure-seeking humanity, they are never enough.

Thank you for forgiving us for not holding the moment like a divine spark, safe within cupped hands to light the way in darker times. Instead we let it go and stumble on, yet still you forgive us and raise us up time and time again.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of praise and thanksgiving**

Father, this time two years ago,
the world began to change as the pandemic took hold.
It set us on a path we could not have imagined,
a rollercoaster of fear and despair.
We thank you for being with us every step of the way.
Thank you for the times when we witnessed the best of humanity;
for those who selflessly worked to save lives,
produce vaccines and keep the country running;
for those who raised funds and spirits.
For every time you sent someone
or something to lift us up, O Lord,
we give thanks and praise;
for every day you helped us to carry on
when the tunnel was long
and the light at the end of it dim,
we praise your holy name.
The world has changed, and we have been changed;
let us take what we have seen and learned
to light our pilgrim way ever more.
**Amen.**

**Prayers for Ukraine**

Following the military invasion of Ukraine, resources are available to help churches and individuals pray for peace and for the peoples of Ukraine and Russia, and reflect on the Christian call to be peacemakers.

The [Joint Public Issues Team](http://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/) of the United Reformed Church, Methodist Church and Baptist Union has issued the following prayer:

God of all,
with alarm and concern we bring before you
the military intervention in Ukraine.

In a world you made for peace and flourishing,
we lament the use of armed force.

We mourn every casualty of this conflict,
every precious life extinguished by war.
We pray comfort for those who grieve
and those who are fearful.

Hear our longing that leaders and nations
will honour the worth of all people
by having the courage
to resolve conflict through dialogue.

May all our human failings be transformed
by your wonderful grace and goodness.

We ask this in the name of Christ,
the author of peace and sustainer of Creation.
Amen.

**Luke 9.26-43**

**Sermon**

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is deeply worrying. It changes the geopolitical relationships in the world. Some have commented that it takes us back into a Cold War between East and West[[1]](#endnote-1). What has not been commented on, mainly because our society is no longer religiously literate, and our media doesn’t do faith, is the spiritual connections in this conflict.

Clare Amos was *was head of the interreligious office of the World Council and Churches, and she writes about the connections between Russia and Ukraine on a spiritual level which may be prompting this incursion to protect Ukraine’s spiritual link to Russia.*

She writes[[2]](#endnote-2) about Vladimir, the Prince of Kiev in the 10th century, Vladimir, who had spent many years as a pagan, decided that he wanted to discover which was the ‘true faith’. So, he sent envoys to various lands to find out more about the religious practices of each: the Latins of Rome; the Kazar Jewish community and the Muslims of Bulgaria. Each of these envoys reported back, but in each case with qualifications about what they had seen and experienced. In turn Vladimir decided that none of these would be the faith he would adopt.

However, those who were sent to Constantinople (Istanbul) the home of Eastern Orthodox Christianity visited the great church of Haghia Sophia (Holy Wisdom) in the city and were overwhelmed by their experiences. As they put it on their return to Vladimir: ‘Then we went to Constantinople and they led us to the place where they worship their God, and we knew not whether we were in heaven or earth, for on earth there is no such vision nor beauty, and we do not know how to describe it; we only know that God dwells among human beings. We cannot forget that beauty’ ([Beauty Will Save the World - Brian Zahnd](https://brianzahnd.com/2010/12/beauty-will-save-the-world/)).

When he heard the report of the envoys to Constantinople Vladimir was so moved that he himself was baptized as a member of the Orthodox Church and, (as was current then) ensured that the lands that he ruled also followed this faith. From this beginning Eastern Orthodoxy travelled eastwards throughout Russia to become the normative faith of the people of that land, and Vladimir became viewed as the founding father of the Russian Orthodox Church. As a result, the city of Kiev itself is seen by many Russian Orthodox Christians as the ‘mother city’ of their faith. In 2019 Patriarch Kirill of Moscow even suggested that for the Russian people Kiev played the role that Jerusalem had for many other Christians ([Russian patriarch likens Kiev for Russian Orthodoxy to Jerusalem for global Christianity - Society & Culture - TASS](https://tass.com/society/1042662)).

Ukraine’s current leadership has sought to create a local Orthodox church independent of the Moscow Patriarchate in the country since it came to power after the 2014 coup.

The cultural and religious history of Kiev, which is comparatively little known or appreciated in Western Europe must be playing a part in current Russian attitudes. It is not without interest – and may indeed be significant – that Putin’s own first name is Vladimir. Putin is a strong supporter of the Orthodox Church.

That vision of beauty, of the church as a place where worship happens that bridges the gap between heaven and earth lies at the heart of Eastern Orthodox spirituality. Similarly, the essential vision that the story of the transfiguration of Christ wants to offer us is to affirm that in this special moment of time, in this mountain-top place, heaven has met earth, and earth has welcomed heaven. And nothing can quite be the same ever again.

Given these theological resonances, it is perhaps not surprising that ‘transfiguration’, and the celebration of Jesus’ own experience of this, is a concept that is far more cherished among Eastern Orthodox Christians rather than their western brothers and sisters (including us!). That is our loss.

The story of the Transfiguration of Jesus is a fascinating story. I just want to make three points about it. ***The first is that whilst mountain top experiences are great, we need to be rooted in reality.***

A little boy was out in his front garden, throwing a ball up in the air. An elderly passer-by asked the boy what he was doing. He replied, "I am playing a game of catch with God. I throw the ball up in the air and he throws it back."

I am in no position to comment on God's ability to play ball, but I do know that whatever goes up must come down... The process is so predictable that you could refer to it as a scientific law. The same process applies to our religious lives. It is a good thing to "go up" to a great experience with God, but we will become greatly disillusioned if we do not remember that eventually we have to "come down" again.

Many of us have had them, those times when we felt like we were on top of the world, really happy, confident that we knew all the answers, could solve any problem that came up. Or we felt that we were really close to God, really in tune with God's plan for us. In those moments we were excited and alive, and everything seemed new.

The moment might have come at some exciting event in your life: graduation, baptism, your first kiss, your first day on your first job, your wedding, the birth of a child, even catching your very first fish. It might have been something really spiritual, like a week at church camp or a church retreat. Or it might have been something of a smaller, quieter nature, like a very intimate conversation with your father or mother when you felt that they
honestly understood what you were saying and why you felt the way you did.

We call these "mountaintop experiences," and oh how we hate to come down off that mountain! We want to hang on to that moment for as long as we can. "Let's just stay right here and let the rest of the world go by for a while."
But to freeze that one moment in time shuts off the possibility of the next moment.

In the Gospel reading for today we hear the writer of Luke give his version of the event which we call "The Transfiguration of Jesus." For Jesus it was a time of confirmation and affirmation of his ministry. For Peter, James, and John it was a brief glimpse of the transcendent, a peek at the reality that lies just beyond everyday life.

But notice that Jesus quickly led the disciples back down off that
mountaintop - in spite of Peter's desire to pitch a tent and camp there for a long while. Jesus led them back into the daily routine of teaching and preaching and caring for the broken and hurting people of the world they lived in, back to the reality of life in the valley.

The Oscar winning movie Chariots of Fire tells the story of two athletes at the 1920 Paris Olympics. Harold Abrahams, after a gigantic struggle as much against himself as against the other runners, achieved the gold medal in the 100 yards. Eric Liddell, the devout Christina who had refused to run on a Sunday, switched events and won the gold medal in the 440yards. It is a moving double story, all the more so for being true.

After the games were over, the movie shows all the athletes returning on the boat train to London, and spilling out excitedly onto Waterloo station. All except Harold Abrahams. His girlfriend waits anxiously as the crowd thins out. Only when they have all gone does Harold emerge slowly from the train. He has achieved what he set out to do. He has the long-coveted prize in his hand. He has been up the mountain and is realising that whatever he does now he will never stand there again. He has come down from the giddy heights to face reality.

All the gospel writers follow the story of the transfiguration with the story of the boy who is desperately ill, so sick that the disciples hadn’t been able to cure him. They seem to be telling us that the two go together: the mountain top experiences and the shrieking, stubborn demon.

Many people prefer to live their lives without either, to be people of the plateau, undramatic and unexciting. God seems to call some to that kind of life. But for many, dramatic visions and spiritual experiences are balanced by huge demands. The more open we are to God, and to the different dimensions of God’s glory, the more we seem to be open to the pain of the world. We are right to be wary when we return from some great worship service, when we rise from a time of prayer in which God seemed close and his love real and powerful. These things are never given for their own sake, but so that, as we are equipped by them, God can use us within his needy world.

***Second thing that stands out for me in this story is the incompetence of the disciples – which should encourage us all!*** The disciples were overwhelmed by the transfiguration, and blurted out things they didn’t mean. Peter didn’t know what he said. I’m sure we have all been in that situation where, because of our experience is limited and we don’t know what to do, we say something inappropriate, or do nothing? Perhaps we have been stumped by a question at a job interview where you realise you didn’t do yourself justice.

That’s the situation Peter found himself in on the Mount of Transfiguration. Awe-struck by what he had just witnessed he said the first thing that came into his head, trying to capture the moment Peter seems to think it was good idea to keep Moses, Elijah and Jesus there for ever – let’s make shelters for you he says – but he spoke without knowing what he was saying. You could put his rash words down to just being a typical male. When confronted with a situation he didn’t know how to handle he immediately wants to do something practical – get out the black and Decker and knock up a few shelters.

You have got to love Peter. Eugene Petersen writes that among the apostles, the one absolutely stunning success was Judas, and the one thorough failure was Peter.

Judas was a success in the ways that most impress us: he was successful both financially and politically. He cleverly arranged to control the money of the apostolic band; he skilfully manipulated the political forces of the day to accomplish his goal.

And Peter was a failure in ways that we most dread: he was impotent in a crisis and socially inept. At the arrest of Jesus he collapsed, a hapless, blustering coward; in the most critical situations of his life with Jesus, the confession on the road to Caesarea Philippi and the vision on the Mount of transfiguration, he said the most embarrassingly inappropriate things. He was not the companion we would want with us in time of danger, and he was not the kind of person we would feel comfortable with at a social occasion.

Time, of course, has reversed our judgments on the two men. Judas is now a byword for betrayal, and Peter is one of the most honoured names in the church and in the world. Judas is a villain; Peter is a saint. Yet the world continues to chase after the successes of Judas, financial wealth and political power, and to defend itself against the failures of Peter, impotence and ineptness.

Peter’s failings would be transfigured in the fullness of time too. It should give hope to us all.

***Finally why is it that we can’t share some experiences yet there are others we keep silent about and tell no one?*** The disciples Peter, James and John, having witnessed the transfiguration kept silent and did not at that time say a word to anyone of what they had seen. (Verse 36)

When we can’t share experiences, is it because words fail us or are we afraid of what others might think?

Is the same true of sharing our faith in Jesus Christ? Do words fail us so that we are unable to talk about what means so much to us personally? Is this why we keep silent and fail to share the good news of Jesus, who has the power to transfigure us and all situations?

Or is it because we are afraid of failing, afraid of the reaction of others? The disciples couldn’t heal the young boy at the foot of the mountain but they hadn’t been afraid to try. Are we ready to give up and keep to ourselves the good news of Jesus and the love of God?

Peter, James and John did eventually talk of what they had experienced on the mountain top, or at least Luke implies they did. Sometimes a period of reflection and thought is necessary and helpful. But we must find ways to share the good news we have. Even if we have to struggle for words, we have such good news that our sharing will not fail in God’s time.

I know that unless someone had been brave enough to share their faith with me – I wouldn’t be here now. My parents never talked about religion in the home so I was never going to get anything to help me there. But fortunately, thank God, I came across people who would talk with me about the faith. And it made all the difference and has led me to have many mountain top experiences of knowing God’s closeness and glory. When you find the courage to share your experience of faith – you can make all the difference to someone’s life.

Transfiguration: from the mountain top to the valley bottom; even in our mistakes God can transfigure our lives; and calls us to share those experiences of faith with others, that the world may be transformed and the glory of God shine forth and the peace and love of Christ transfigures our life and conflicts.





**Prayers of intercession**

Lord of great glory, you have changed many a pilgrim’s path by removing the veil from their eyes and revealing your power and glory.

We pray for all in the world today, for all heavily veiled by the world and its values.

We pray for your church and all who follow you; may your church stand strong upon the word,  reflecting more and more of your glory.

Magnificent, Glorious One, hear our prayer.
**Change lives with your transforming power.**

Lord, we pray for your glory to capture and change the world at large. We pray for Russia and Ukraine, where the situation is escalating. We pray for all caught up in conflict; those who desire controlling power and the effect it has on the rest of the people.

We pray that the revival sweeping through the native Americans will spread to the rest of the world, bringing peace and unity.

Magnificent, Glorious One, hear our prayer.
**Change lives with your transforming power.**

Lord of great glory, we pray for your hand on our nation as Covid-related laws come to an end. We pray for the health of Queen Elizabeth; may she fully recover from covid. We pray for all who are sick.

We pray for change to be wrought in our communities, our own neighbourhoods; especially where knife culture is rife, and where poverty is widespread.

Lord, on the mountainside the disciples’ eyes were for a while clouded by sleep. We pray for all whose eyes are clouded by prejudice; those set in their own views and ideas.

We pray for all held by lethargy; who live in the state of wishful thinking and can’t see to motivate themselves beyond, ‘If only’ and ‘I wish.’

We pray for those stubborn in disobedience, who refuse to listen and choose to see and live their own way rather than yours.

We pray for the proud, afraid of losing face, valuing their reputations above all else.

Magnificent, Glorious One, hear our prayer.
**Change lives with your transforming power.**

Lord of great glory, we are all works in progress, never knowing perfection until we stand face to face with you in eternity. Until that time we pray for all who seek a deeper knowledge of your word and new horizons with you.

We pray for times of refreshment on the mountain tops and ask that our lives might reflect more and more of your glory to those around us.

Magnificent, Glorious One, hear our prayer.
**Change lives with your transforming power. Amen.**

Jesus, may your glory shine on us.
Jesus, may your peace be with us.
Jesus, may you love and care for us,
and may we love and care for others.
Today, and always. **Amen.**



**A sending out prayer**

Father, thank you that you are transforming us every day.
We pray that, not only will we have mountaintop experiences,
but also that we will know your presence with us
in our everyday and ordinary moments.
May we be continually astounded at your greatness,
and may it show in our lives.
**Amen.**

1. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-60515342 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2022/117-january-february-2022-c/transfiguration/the-week-in-focus [↑](#endnote-ref-2)