

'Praise The Lord' (Psalm 148)

ALL: Praise the Lord!

Praise God from heaven,
praise him from the mountaintops,
praise him, all you his angels,
praise him, all you his warriors,

ALL: Praise the Lord!

Praise God from the kitchen,
praise him from the living room,
praise him, all you labourers,
praise him, all you job seekers,

ALL: Praise the Lord!

Praise him, sun and moon,
praise him, you morning stars,
praise him, high heaven,
praise him, heavenly rain clouds,

Oh, let them praise the name of God -
for he spoke them into being.

ALL: Praise the Lord!

Praise him, banks and governments,
praise him, hospitals and health centres,
praise him, schools and universities,
praise him, theatres and media,

Oh, let them praise the name of God -
for he spoke leadership, care, learning and creativity into being.

ALL: Praise the Lord!

Praise him, young and old,
praise him, all you lonely,
praise him, all you busy,
praise him, all you bored,

ALL: Praise the Lord!

Praise him when you're happy,
praise him through the dark times,
praise him when you're working,

praise him when at rest.

ALL: Praise the Lord!

Let all praise the name of God -
it's the only Name worth praising.
His glory is above all -
Hallelujah!

ALL: Praise the Lord!

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[Mark 9:2-9](#)

Our set reading from Mark's Gospel takes quite a leap this week from last week. For the last few weeks we've been in the beginning of the first half of Mark, looking at the early ministry of Jesus.

But this week we jump to the beginning of the second half of Mark's Gospel. Just before this reading, the first half has come to a climax with Simon Peter confessing that Jesus is the Christ. However, his understanding of that proves to be deficient, when he reacts adversely to Jesus' first prophecy of his forthcoming suffering and death.

Peter has the right words, the right creed if you like, but not the right understanding. He appears not to be alone, because Jesus teaches the whole crowd about his suffering and also the suffering that his followers will face.

Then he prophesies that some of those present will not taste death until they have seen the kingdom of God come with power (verse 1).

I go into this detail, because Mark clearly links today's story with that episode in his opening words: 'After six days' (verse 2). If Peter and any other disciples cannot understand the link between who Jesus is and how his mission will be carried out through words and arguments, then the experience of a dramatic divine encounter may do the trick.

As a scholar named James Edwards writes,

In Peter's confession Mark teaches how disciples should *think* about Jesus (8:33), and in the subsequent transfiguration narrative he allows them to *behold* his true nature.¹

If theological argument won't work, then perhaps experience will.

Firstly, the Transfiguration is a story of *divine revelation*. Mountains were often places in the Bible where God said or did something special, and all the more if – like this one – it was described as a 'high mountain' (verse 2). Specifically, this account is reminiscent of Moses going up Mount Sinai to meet with God and receive the Law. Even the six-day gap between this story and the previous one may echo the six days Moses spent at Mount Sinai with God.

All this, then, should prepare Peter, James, and John for a word of revelation from God. Frightened as we know later on they are (verse 6) – and no surprise at that – the clues are there for them as devout Jews to recognise that they should prepare for a revelation from heaven itself.

Sometimes I wonder how prepared we are to hear from God. Is it because we bumble along from the day to day without tuning ourselves in that we rarely hear from him? Is it that so often God has to interrupt our daily routines in an attempt to catch our ears? Might it be that we could tune ourselves in, ready for when he wants to reveal something to us?

This is why I bang on from time to time about our use of the spiritual disciplines, such as personal Bible reading and prayer. These practices get us used to the voice of God. That voice will not always speak something big and dramatic as in today's story, but as a baby learns soon to recognise its parents' voices, so we need to do the same with God. The more we practise the spiritual disciplines, and the more we look and listen for the signs of his presence in our routine duties.

Secondly, the Transfiguration is an account of *divine glory*.

^{2b} There he was transfigured before them. ³ His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them.

Think back to Christmas for a moment. Maybe not this last Christmas specifically, but the Christmas season generally.

Specifically, think back to singing 'Hark! The herald-angels sing' and that line, 'Veiled in flesh the Godhead see.' God coming in human flesh meant that we were shielded from the dazzling brilliance of God's glory. It is almost too much to bear, rather like the way we warn children not to gaze directly at the Sun.

But here at the Mount of Transfiguration, all the layers that protect sinful humanity from encountering the divine glory are stripped away.

Despite the faltering description, v. 3 succeeds in conveying that the transfiguration is so complete that Jesus' clothing as well as his person is transformed. ...

The diaphanous garments and brilliant face of Jesus signify total transformation and suffusion with the divine presence.²

Jesus reflects the presence of God every bit as much as Moses did on Mount Sinai, if not more so. God hasn't spoken his revelation yet, but he is showing up.

So again, Peter, James, and John are being called to attention. What they find themselves in counts. It's important.

Not every Christian has dramatic experiences of God, but most of us would talk about times in our lives when God has seemed especially close. Sometimes those seasons of closeness and almost tangible presence are there to comfort or reassure us through a hard time, but on many other occasions, like the Transfiguration, God is not simply wanting to give us a spiritual thrill, he is wanting to transform us more into people who reflect his glory.

I simply want to ask whether we are open to that.

Thirdly, the Transfiguration is a narrative of *divine supremacy*, and specifically of Jesus' supremacy.

⁴ And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus.

Why Elijah and Moses? There have been various theories, but the important thing is this: the way this is worded originally gives an indication that they are not equals with Jesus: 'they hold an audience with Jesus as a superior.'³ They appear and they disappear. There is no command to listen to them. They are 'representatives of the prophetic tradition that, according to the belief of the early church, would anticipate Jesus.'⁴

Jesus is superior to both of them. Their lives and ministries pointed ultimately to the fulfilment of God's plans in Jesus. And Jesus is not merely a prophet, as religions like Islam would have you believe.

Jesus is more than our Friend and our Brother. He is more than the celestial lover that some hymns and worship songs portray. He is more even than Saviour. He is Lord.

Peter, James, and John here are learning that Jesus isn't just a wonderful rabbi. He's even more than Israel's promised deliverer. They owe him their allegiance.

And so do we.

Fourthly, the Transfiguration speaks to us of *divine presence*.

⁵ Peter said to Jesus, 'Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters – one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.'

⁶ (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.)

Poor Peter. He and his friends are scared out of their wits. What comes out of his mouth is something that would be worthy of a typical pious Jew. He wants to build shelters, or tabernacles, and the Jews looked forward to a time when God would build a new tabernacle or dwelling for his presence on earth to replace the old one that Israel had had in the wilderness.⁵

But what he doesn't yet grasp is that the new tabernacle is here already. Jesus is the new tabernacle. He is the presence of God on earth.

So Jesus is more than one who is ranked higher in God's ranks than Elijah and Moses. He is the presence of God on earth. That is enough to blow the fuses in the mind of a devout Jew. It is why many learned Jews rejected Jesus.

But when you meet Jesus, you meet God. Later Christians would look at all the biblical data and formulate the doctrine of the Trinity, but here is one major sign of how Jesus expanded and exploded traditional Jewish beliefs about one God, the chosen people, and the messianic hope.⁶

Jesus, being God who came in human flesh to earth, is the climax of God's plans. And as such, we see everything through the light of him. We interpret our hopes and dreams in the light of Jesus. We interpret the Scriptures in the light of Jesus. We frame our very lives in the light of Jesus.

When we realise that God has been present on earth through Jesus and that he is still present through his Spirit, how does that change the way we live?

Because it should.

Fifthly and finally, the Transfiguration speaks to us of *divine vindication*.

⁷ Then a cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud: 'This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!'

⁸ Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.

You may recall that a voice from heaven spoke to Jesus in similar terms at his baptism: 'You are my beloved Son, I am well pleased with you.' Here, the words are similar, but they are not addressed to Jesus. Instead, God the Father speaks to Peter, James, and John: 'This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!'

They were to listen to all that Jesus had told them. Doubtless – and most importantly – that referred to his prophecies of his coming suffering and resurrection, which had offended Peter so much.

No: the voice from heaven tells the disciples that what Jesus has said is right and true. You must take it on board, even if you don't understand it.

When we make Jesus out to sound so much like us, with similar views to us, similar ethical standpoints, similar political views, and so on, then we no longer have Jesus, we have an idol. Jesus will always say and do things that go against the things we cherish. But because of his divine nature, we are the ones who need to change.

And here, that's just what the Father expects of Peter, James, and John. Put aside your objections to the Cross. Put aside your assumptions that you know better.

And that's a very fitting place for us to end this week's reflection, especially as we prepare to enter Lent on Wednesday. The Transfiguration calls us to a life where we increasingly conform our will and our ways to the will and the ways of Jesus, who has the right to do this, as God who came to Earth. And whose journey to Earth led to the Cross.

We start that journey again now, and as we go into Lent.

Prayers of Intercession – 'If We Stay Silent'

If we remain silent,
who will rise up?

If we close our eyes
and turn our heads,
who will see the injustice?

If we wring our hands
and shuffle our feet,
who will act with mercy?

What if we were called
for such a time as this,
to see through different eyes
and move to a different drum.

Father, give us your strength,
at such a time as this,
to lead distinctive lives,
and see your Kingdom come.

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Blessing

The peace of God which passes all understanding,
keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God
and of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

And the blessing of God,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
be with you all,
now and forever.

Amen.

¹ James R Edwards, *The Gospel According To Mark*, p261.

² Edwards, p263, p264.

³ Edwards, p265.

⁴ Edwards, p265.

⁵ Edwards, p266.

⁶ 'Monotheism, election, and eschatology' in NT Wright's words.