

Exodus 24.12-18
Matthew 17.1-9
19th February 2023



Choosing the Light

Theme Introduction

One of the best memories I hold of my time as a teenager in a church youth group is the week, we spent in the north of Scotland on a church holiday. Seven days full of fun, friendship and laughter with the shared meals and outings being as important as our times of worship and prayer.

To get there, we travelled overnight in two minibuses, and it was the first time I realised that Edinburgh was really in southern Scotland, because once we got there it was quite a surprise that we still had a third of the journey yet to go. So, to that dreaded question: *Are we nearly there yet?* The answer was an emphatic: No!

We arrived in the Scottish capital around dawn and as the light was breaking, we left the minibuses for half an hour and all of us walked, bleary eyed, still half asleep, down Prince's Street to Waverley Station and back.

It was a tingy sort of moment. We were on the cusp of night slowly turning into day, with Edinburgh Castle high up on the mound, emerging from the darkness into light. A great start to our holiday and one that has always lingered, affectionately, in my memory.

I suspect that all of us have had moments of dawning. Those times when darkness has faded, either physically or metaphorically, and we have been glad to welcome in the light of a new day.

In today's New Testament Bible reading, from the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus is described as shining like a bright light. He's joined by his inner core of disciples, Peter, James and John, and appearing beside him are two heroes from the Jewish Scriptures: Elijah and Moses.

It's a dramatic picture, and it reminds us of another depiction of Jesus at his baptism when God affirms him from heaven with the words: *This is my beloved Son*. Exactly the same words are spoken from heaven at this moment too, the occasion when Jesus is transfigured and shines, just for a moment with heavenly brightness.

To the original readers of Matthew's gospel so much about this depiction would have reminded them of the images used to describe what they called *The End Times*. Those times that many looked forward to when God's Kingdom of love and light would fully come to pass. Yet here they were on an ordinary day, up a hill, and it was like a small taste of

heaven being revealed before their eyes.

It was a moment of encouragement and a moment of joy. An occasion to inspire them to keep on believing that light is stronger than darkness and that love is stronger than hate.

And so, they went down the hill to continue walking with Jesus but now with a spring in their step. They felt they had glimpsed something full of goodness and hope, a glimpse of heaven shining from the transfigured face of the Lord Jesus Christ.

It's probably not so dramatic for us, but we too can have similar times. Maybe as we are praying or singing in church, sharing a coffee with a dear friend, enjoying a family meal, or looking out on a beautiful scene. Or even walking down Princes Street at 5 o'clock in the morning – the light dawns and our hearts are glad.

Let us pray:

Shining God, we thank you for moments when your light guides, directs and inspires us, helping us on our way. Even in the darkness help us believe in your light. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Sermon

Gracious God, we thank you for your word in scripture and made flesh in the Lord Jesus Christ. Help us now to catch your voice and speak, we pray, to our hearts and minds. In Jesus' name. Amen.

I wonder what you make of The Transfiguration? Here we are, just about to move from the season of Epiphany into Lent on Wednesday, and we have one final story about God's light being revealed. Perhaps the most dramatic of all the stories we've heard since Christmas.

Matthew bases this symbolic narrative on the same story told by Mark in his gospel. Yet Jesus is softer on Peter in Matthew's version. He doesn't get told off in today's reading for the suggestion of building booths, or shrines, to commemorate the Transfiguration. And when all three disciples get worried about the strange things going on up that hillside, Jesus comforts them and tells them not to be afraid, not to be scared by God's light but to welcome it and rejoice in it.

There can be something truly uplifting about light piercing the darkness.

It's become common practice these days at pop concerts in stadiums to have a moment when the lights go out and the thousands of people in the audience are asked to turn on the torch function of their mobile phones. In just a few moments the stadium sparkles with tens of thousands of small lights. A beautiful moment with each person bringing their own light and sharing it with others.

Matthew, understandably, always thinks of hills as special places where we feel close to God. Whether they are used for the Sermon on the Mount or for a moment of transfiguration, God is near.

And it all echoes with the Old Testament reading today of Moses and Joshua ascending the mountain to receive the 10 Commandments. A few chapters later we encounter a

Moses with a shining face because he had communed with God.

And so, in picture language and symbolic narrative we are being taught that there are times when heaven seems to touch earth. Thin places. Moments of encounter. Times when we gain a broader, deeper, even divine perspective on life that brings enlightenment.

And Matthew is keen on this, because much of his gospel is an attempt to answer the question; *Who is Jesus?* And both here and at his baptism the answer comes back: Jesus is God's beloved. And in the face of Jesus, we see something of God in a way that we can understand.

So, in a few chapters time when we hear Jesus talk of living a life of service, even if it means sacrificial service, the disciples can blend this understanding of a humble, servant Jesus with a transfigured one. The conclusion is meant to be: the glory of God is seen in a life given in service, and something of the light of God truly sparkles in any compassionate life.

Now, in his book about Matthew's gospel, the late American Bishop, James Shelby Spong makes a connection between the Jewish Synagogue's Weekly Lectionary, and the Jesus' stories found in the gospel. He basically says for every Jewish story, the early church wrote one in similar vein, teaching similar truths, but now centred on Jesus.

Around wintertime, Bishop Spong states that, a regular Synagogue story would be that of Judas Maccabeus freeing the temple, in 175BC, from the corrupting rule of the Syrians. To celebrate this a festival of Dedication was held, called Hanukkah. Lights were lit as the people once again celebrated the light of God's presence dwelling in the temple.

So, around the Festival of Hannukah Matthew includes this story all about light which Christians call the Transfiguration.

In Matthew's day that temple liberated by Judas Maccabeus has been destroyed by the Romans in AD 70. So, the question becomes: Where does God's light reside today, now the temple is no more? Matthew's answer is that God's light is now seen in the face of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Peter, understandably, wants to commemorate that light by building a shrine.

Now, let's not be too harsh about that suggestion, for Peter is no bumbling fool here. After all that's what happened every year at the Feast of Tabernacles; booths were built and decorated with harvest produce as a way of celebrating God's goodness.

Last year we had the joy of worshipping at the Maidenhead Synagogue at the end of the Feast of Tabernacles and at the end of the service we all went and stood under a

makeshift booth in the courtyard, one that had been decorated by the young people with fruit and little prayers of thanksgiving. It was a wonderful moment, one full of gratitude and joy.

So, if Peter felt, as he clearly did, that what he had experienced on the Mount of Transfiguration was something so joy-filled, so full of God's blessing, it might have seemed just perfectly natural, and traditional, to have it commemorate it in a booth.

Yet, in Mark's version of the story, Jesus rejects that idea. Perhaps teaching us that God's light can never be institutionalised or confined, it floods out everywhere and blesses everyone.

Well, here we are, still at the year's beginning, yet already the season is turning with the prospect of Spring and next week, as Lent begins, we will become increasing aware of more and more light as the days lengthen.

Yet, maybe the most important lesson to hold in our hearts about light is that indestructible ability humans have of believing in it even at the darkest of times.

Light can enter the tiniest crack in the wall and pierce the darkness. And isn't that the way God works so that love wins and light dawns even at the bleakest moment.

In her book *Tested to the Limit*, the Rwandan author and activist Consolee Nishimwe, tells of the darkest time of her life, back in 1994 when Tutsi's, like her family, were being indiscriminately killed. After three months in hiding her father, three brothers, grandfather and uncle were all massacred and one day she heard her father's killers say how happy they were to have murdered him.

This inspiring woman, Consolee Nishimwe writes: *I still have nightmares, YET the voice of God keeps telling me never to give up.*

Isn't that the light, a chink of light, breaking in, and, praise God, piecing her darkness.

I am, at times, astounded and thrilled, by human resilience and by stories of people like Consolee who have deliberately chosen the light. For they, like Peter, James and John, have chosen to come down from the mountain in order to carry something of the light of Christ with them out into their everyday lives.

And we can join them.

May in be so in the name of Jesus, the Light of the World. Amen

Ian Green, Amersham, 9th February 2023