



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

February 14, 2021

The Last Sunday After the Epiphany

Solemn Eucharist

11am

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A Sermon by

The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector

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The glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

*"People ask me, 'What is the use of climbing Mount Everest?' and my answer must at once be, 'It is of no use. There is not the slightest prospect of any gain whatsoever... We shall not bring back a single bit of gold or silver, not a gem, nor any coal or iron... If you cannot understand that there is something in man which responds to the challenge of this mountain and goes out to meet it, that the struggle is the struggle of life itself upward and forever upward, then you won't see why we go. What we get from this adventure is just sheer joy. And joy is, after all, the end of life.'"*¹

Words of George Mallory, the British mountaineer who attempted to reach the summit of Mount Everest in the early 1920's and lost his life doing so.

There is something magnetic about mountains – they are at one and the same time some of the most dangerous and exposed places on earth, and places of immense beauty that, quite literally, broaden the horizons of those who ascend them. As a teenager, I spent many days walking in the Pennines – a mountainous range stretching from The Northern part of Yorkshire down to the Peak district. Like the Catskill Mountains, valleys have been carved out of the rock by glaciers and, then, my rivers. I remember on a school expedition climbing Gordale Scar one bitterly cold spring day, with its bare limestone and with its two waterfalls in flood. It's only 330 feet, but with the water it can be quite a climb and, on this occasion, the noise of the water was deafening. Then the most remarkable thing happened - we reached the top and stood on the plateau looking down over the gorge and then across the barren landscape towards Malham Tarn. It was silent. Quite startlingly so. Silent. The air was crisp; the sky electric blue; and the bright Spring sun dazzled my eyes, so much so that I was suddenly light-headed. It was, quite simply, breathtaking. For the first time, I truly understood why one should always take note when a bible passage mentions a mountain or hill. For this city boy, it was a moment of intense spirituality - a kind of second conversion experience.

In the Hebrew scriptures, mountains are directly associated with God's presence and the glory of God. When fleeing the wrath of Queen Jezebel and her false prophets, Elijah (who appears today in our first lesson) spent forty days and forty nights on Mount Horeb – the mountain of God. You may remember the story: The word of the Lord came to Elijah and said, *"Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by."* Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave." (1 Kings 19:11-13a).

In a similar way, Moses had spent forty days and forty nights fasting on the Mountain of God after the people had sinned and worshipped the golden calf. He made two new tablets of the Law to replace the ones he had

broken but, this time, he asked to see God's glory. *"Moses said, 'Show me your glory, I pray.' And [God] said, 'I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, 'The LORD'; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But," he said, 'you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.'*" (Exodus 33:18-20).

When Moses descended from the mountain, his face was shining and the people of Israel were very afraid, so afraid that Moses had to cover his face with a veil whenever he came down from the mountain. But, as St. Paul reminded the people of Corinth in the passage just before today's epistle reading, Moses also veiled his face because he did not want the people to see that the glory was *fading* from his face. Paul says, *"Since, then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness, not like Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside."* (2 Corinthians 3:12-13).

With all this in mind we turn to today's Gospel reading and we hear familiar words. Jesus ascends a mountain to pray. Jesus often went to a deserted place, particularly a mountain to pray or to teach. This would not have been lost on his first followers – climbing the mountain brings one closer to heaven – closer to God. Only, this time, we are told that this is a *high* mountain and not only that, he takes with him three of his closest disciples – Peter, James, and John to pray with him. And while he is there, he is transfigured; his clothes become dazzlingly white. But, unlike the experience I had when I reached the summit of my climb, this is not because of the sun. No, in fact, all three synoptic gospels tell us that a *cloud* overshadowed them. So, this is not the reflected brightness of the sun. Neither is it the reflected glory of God. This is the glory of God shining from *within* Jesus – it is a bodily transfiguration.

Now we see the significance of Moses and Elijah's presence. This mountain is not named but we know what this mountain should be called – it has become the mountain of God because of the presence of Jesus. Moses asked to see God's glory but he was told *"you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live."* Elijah, similarly, went out to meet the Lord on the Mountain of God as his glory passed by and found him in the still small voice of calm. Now, they gaze on the glory of God and, after all those years, Moses' wish is granted – he gazes on the face of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. Peter, James, and John witness this scene and glimpse the glory of God in the face of Jesus. As Paul says, *"It is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."* (2 Corinthians 4:6).

The transfiguration of Jesus, therefore, is a pivotal moment in the Gospels and the reason why this gospel is read today on the last Sunday after the Epiphany.

As many of you know, the word Epiphany comes from the Greek word for revelation. Over the past few weeks, we have explored the revelation of God's glory, beginning with the celebration of Christmas in which we celebrated the glory of God revealed in the Christ Child – the Word made flesh. The actual feast of the Epiphany reveals the glory of God to the whole world, represented by the visit of the Magi with their significant gifts. Then, through the scriptures we have heard of the revelation of God's glory in the life of Jesus: His baptism in the River Jordan; his first sign at the wedding of Cana in Galilee; and his calling of the first disciples and his confrontation with evil.

Now, on this Last Sunday after the Epiphany we are, as it were, on the mountain with Peter, James, and John and *we* behold his glory. This pivotal moment brings together all that was hoped for in the old covenant and proclaimed in the message of the prophets, and points to a new creation – a new covenant – the fulfilment of the Law; not through words, but through the Word made flesh. Not through the repetition of animal sacrifice but through Jesus' self-offering on the Cross for all humankind. The great biblical theologian N.T. Wright puts it this way,

"The glory of God comes down not to the Temple in Jerusalem, not to the top of Mount Sinai, but onto and into Jesus himself, shining in splendor, talking with Moses and Elijah, drawing the Law and the Prophets together into the time of fulfillment."

*The transfiguration, as we call it, is the central moment. This is when what happens to space in the Temple and to time on the sabbath happens, within the life of Jesus, to the material world itself or rather, more specifically, to Jesus's physical body itself."*²

Sacred space and consecrated time within the person of Jesus Christ.

And liturgically, this last Sunday after the Epiphany is also a moment when we look forward to Holy Week – to the passion, the death, and the Resurrection of Jesus. This transfiguration moment is a reminder that we glimpse that glory but it will only be fully revealed through Christ's passion, death, and Resurrection. When Jesus comes down from the mountain, almost immediately, he prophesies his own death and he sets his face resolutely towards Jerusalem. His glory is not like human glory. God's glory is revealed shining through weakness and on the third day, shining through his glorified risen body.

Therefore, we begin Lent with hope and with joy. We do not have to fear (we know how the story is going to end!). And we know that this transfiguration says something about our hope for the future. Earlier in his letter to the Corinthian Church, Paul said this, *"All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another."* (2 Corinthians 3:18)

Yes, the transfiguration – looking back to the glory of the incarnation and forward to the glorification of Jesus on the Cross and the glory of his Resurrection can also afford *us* hope. As Paul says, writing to the Colossians – "Christ in you, the hope of glory." (see Colossians 1:27)

To end with, some more words of N.T. Wright:

*"What the story of Jesus on the mountain demonstrates, for those with eyes to see or ears to hear, is that, just as Jesus seems to be the place where God's world and ours meet, where God's time and ours meet, so he is also the place where, so to speak, God's matter – God's new creation – intersects with ours. As with everything else in the gospel narrative, the moment is extraordinary, but soon over. It forms part of a new set of signposts, Jesus-shaped signposts, indicating what is to come: a whole new creation, starting with Jesus himself as the seed that is sown in the earth and then rises to become the beginning of that new world."*³

1. George Mallory – *'Climbing Everest: The Complete Writings of George Mallory'*

2. N.T. Wright – *'Simply Jesus'* page 143.

3. N.T. Wright, *'Simply Jesus'* page 144.