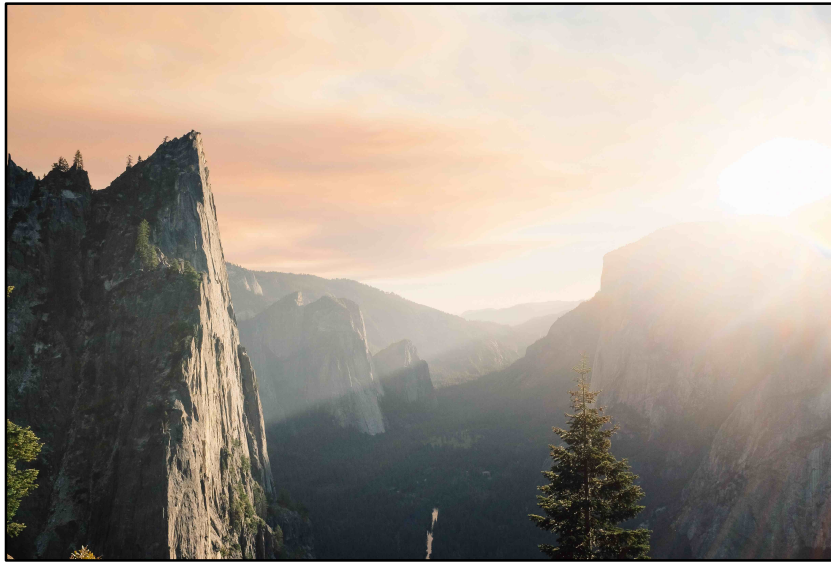


# Sermon on Sunday 27 February

## by Rev. Alan Stewart

*Readings: 2 Corinthians 3. 14-end & Luke 9. 28-36*

### Transfigured



As a young man, I would often take my troubles to the mountain. From there the world and its worries always looked smaller, more manageable. There, I could think and breathe and listen for that still small whisper; 'It will be ok'.

And often, by the time I came down the mountain, those things I carried up with me no longer felt quite so heavy. Life had, in some way, been transfigured.

Mountains have always captured the human imagination. In many cultures they carry great spiritual significance. Physically, of course, they're closer to heaven; a bridge, you might say, between the heavens and the earth. In the Jewish scriptures, mountains were often places of divine encounter, so it's no

coincidence that the Transfiguration, this seminal event in the life of Jesus, takes place upon a mountaintop.

It's an extraordinary tale with many layers.

The first thing we're told is that Jesus' appearance changes; he is transfigured; literally, he begins to shine, Jesus, shine. And then, as if this supernatural glow isn't enough, it becomes even more surreal. Suddenly, he's joined by two legendary and long-dead figures of Jewish history; the big guns; Moses the Lawgiver and Elijah the Prophet. These spirits of religion past then strike up a conversation with Jesus about what lies ahead of him, beneath the mountain. Those of you who know your Harry Potter films will have seen a similar moment when the spirits of family and friends come to comfort Harry before he makes the ultimate sacrifice.

These two religious heavyweights are also there to give credence to the identity and ministry of Jesus. It's a way of saying, loud and clear, that this Jesus is the one the prophets (like Elijah) were talking about; the one who would bring balance and fulfilment to the Law of Moses.

And then, by way of comic interlude from this cosmic conversation, Peter, in typical foot-in-mouth fashion, suggests a little on-the-spot DIY. 'Let's build some shelters for our distinguished ghosts. Let's set up camp, let's never leave this place.'

And then, as if it couldn't get any weirder, Peter's interrupted by a voice from a cloud: 'This is my Son; listen to him.' Mind-blowing stuff; so explosive, in fact, that the three disciples are encouraged not to repeat a word of it until the time is right.

Those words, so similar to those spoken by his Father at his baptism, were exactly, I imagine, what Jesus (and his friends) needed to hear at that time. Jesus, perhaps, needed to be reminded that God believed in him, because ahead of him, beneath the mountain, lay the beginning of the end; his ultimate sacrifice. So, maybe it was more than his appearance which was transfigured that day, maybe fear, doubt, disillusion were transfigured too.

Peter wanted to stay there because it felt like time had stopped, heaven had touched earth. Old Testament ghosts and heavenly voices aside, I wonder if you've ever had moments when time stood still; moments that distinctly felt like you'd found yourself in the flow of life, or on holy ground, perhaps? Moments, maybe, when you've felt an overwhelming sense of wellbeing or love or forgiveness; an epiphany perhaps; a flash of clarity; a revelation that you are not alone in the universe.

So-called Mountaintop experiences are precious but rare. Over time I've come to believe that, wonderful as they are, eventually we have to learn to live 'beneath the mountain', within the noise and the mess. What's important is that we make time to draw aside regularly to climb that mountain within us, so we can gain a new perspective, so that we too can be transfigured. Often, that's about setting aside a few minutes of silence and solitude, taking a few deep breaths; breathing in strength, breathing out anxiety; breathing in the kindness of God, breathing out self-criticism.

And then, perhaps, we will begin to notice that every bush is burning; that the universe is indeed alive with the presence of God. Always, it's a matter of awareness. Because always God is present. What's absent is our awareness.

Spiritual experiences can sometimes feel very divisive. Too easily, we can feel like second-class believers because we haven't experienced that mountain in that particular way.

Speaking about the presence and absence of God, one of the leaders from the Northumbria Community used this illustration: He asked three people to come forward and to imagine that he, the speaker, was God. To the first he spoke beautiful words of affirmation and blessing and you could see that face come alive. The second he approached and without any words just held in the tightest embrace. The third he simply watched from a distance with a smile.

And then he asked, 'Which one of the three did God love the most?' The first two spoke of feeling very loved, the third less so. The speaker then went on to explain that the experience of the third was the normal mature experience; that, yes, of course, God loves equally; but equally he knows that the most mature, most sustainable place to get to is: 'Even though I don't feel you or hear you, I will trust you; God, you have nothing to prove to me. You are enough and I am enough'.

The Transfiguration is a rare moment when the veil between this reality and the greater reality is peeled back and we see something glorious, something other. Sam Wells, Vicar of St Martin-in-the-Fields, says it's a moment when we discover an upstairs in a downstairs world. It's a glimpse of the Real (capital R); another dimension of life.

Traditionally, many have interpreted this as a revelation of Jesus' divinity. I prefer to think of it as a revelation of his full humanity. We are here catching sight of the glory of God, which, as St Irenaeus once said, 'Is a human being fully alive'.

Those mind-blowing words lead me to believe that what the disciples witnessed that day was what lies within every human being. We are made of the divine. We each hold within us an inextinguishable light; the very presence of God.

Listen to these words from the writer Marianne Williamson:

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves: Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?

Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."

The early rabbis said that the reason God forbade any graven images or idols of himself was because his intention was always that it should be human beings, you and me, who bear his image to the world.

The people who descended the mountain on that first Transfiguration were not the same people who climbed it.

They had seen another perspective. They had glimpsed the glory of God and the glory of themselves.

Jesus was not the only one transfigured that day, they all were; they had all witnessed a little more of who they were and who they were intended to be. And God's intention for them, and for their friends who didn't witness this extraordinary thing, and for each one of us, is that we become part of the transfiguration of the life that lies beneath the mountain.

### *The Transfiguration*

*<sup>28</sup> About eight days after Jesus said this, he took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray. <sup>29</sup> As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. <sup>30</sup> Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. <sup>31</sup> They spoke about his departure,<sup>[a]</sup> which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem. <sup>32</sup> Peter and his companions were very sleepy, but when they became fully awake, they saw his glory and the two men standing with him. <sup>33</sup> As the men were leaving Jesus, Peter said to him, "Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." (He did not know what he was saying.)*

*<sup>34</sup> While he was speaking, a cloud appeared and covered them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. <sup>35</sup> A voice came from the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him." <sup>36</sup> When the voice had spoken, they found that Jesus was alone. The disciples kept this to themselves and did not tell anyone at that time what they had seen.*