

Sunday 10 August 2025 - *The Transfiguration* – Ian Wallis

The Revd Ian Wallis takes us to the mountain-top perspective of Jesus' Transfiguration, the fulcrum moment in Jesus' ministry. It enables us also to see God in our own lives.

Readings:

Daniel 7:9–10 and 13-14. Luke 9:28–36.

Sermon: *The Transfiguration* – Ian Wallis

Early in our married life, Liz and I were regular visitors to the Isle of Skye. Those of you familiar with this inner Hebridean idyl will have no difficulty in understanding why. In those days, I was much fitter and enjoyed the challenge of scaling the peaks. Skye boasts an impressive array of summits forming what is known as the Black Cuillin ridge – a formidable eruption of volcanic Gabro, unforgiving to the touch and culminating in a jagged edge of twenty or so Munros.

Over the years, I climbed them all, but I remember my first two assents were of Sgurr Alasdair, the highest. On both occasions, the ridge was shrouded in thick mist which I hoped would clear when I reached the top. In true Scottish fashion, it didn't! Conditions on my third assent were no more promising when I parked up at Glen Brittle and traced the water course up to Cloire Lagan, a lochan nestling at the base of a horseshoe of peaks from Sgurr Dearg in the north to Sgurr Sgumain in the south. The mist thickened and the rain became more intense as I started the long grind up the Great Stone Chute of broken scree.

When I reached the summit of Alasdair for the third time, drenched in frustration and sweat, visibility can't have been more than 20 feet or so. I took shelter behind a cairn and resigned myself to another picnic lunch in the driving rain, enveloped within a miasma of mist. Suddenly, within what can't have been more than a few moments, the rain abated, the mist lifted, the sun broke through, revealing a glorious panorama, laden with texture and colour and, strangely, scent, reaching for miles – one that had always been there, only hidden from sight – transforming my sense of place and purpose.

This morning's gospel reading transports us to another mountain, although in this case its whereabouts remain uncertain. Was it mount Hermon in southern Syria? Possibly. Or what about mount Meron in northern Israel? Again, this could have been the place, along with other contenders. But, as we will shortly discover, the geographical location is very much secondary to the place this encounter occupies within Jesus' vocation.

It stands at the fulcrum, the turning-point, where his ministry among the indigenous people of the agrarian villages and commercial townships of The Galilee was drawing to a close – a ministry characterized by healing and forgiveness, by hospitality and celebration, by preaching and teaching about the energizing and transforming presence of God breaking into human experience. But now Jesus' face was set towards Jerusalem as he prepared to embark on that *via dolorosa* which would culminate in the cross.

Immediately beforehand, at Caesarea Philippi, that ancient shrine and sacred sanctuary, Jesus had confided in his closest disciples where all this was heading - where his ministry would end up – and it can't have been easy listening:

Jesus sternly ordered and commanded the disciples not to tell anyone, saying, 'The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. (Luke 9.21-22)

Unsurprisingly, they couldn't receive it - they struggled to comprehend how suffering could possibly yield blessing or death become a source of new life or separation and loss further God's loving purposes. And amidst their turmoil and confusion – the emotional fog of it all – Jesus leads Peter, James and John up a mountain to gain a different perspective – to see things through God's eyes, if you will.

Now, to appreciate the significance of this scene, we need to recall how mountains are places of clarity and encounter in the Scriptures. Remember how it was on mount Horeb, in the southern reaches of the Sinai peninsula, that Moses sensed the presence of God in a burning bush and, with it, came a passion to liberate an oppressed people and to lead them into freedom. It was to that same mountain, also known as Sinai, that Moses returned time and again and, on each occasion, it was as if the veil separating heaven from earth had been drawn back, revealing the glory of God.

Or, again, what about Elijah on mount Carmel when he confronted the false prophets of Baal and revealed the awesome glory of God in holocaust and all-consuming fire. Or, in contrast, how afterwards he retreated to mount Horeb where he encountered God once more, only this time it was in the silence of the human heart and in the darkness of a despairing soul.

You see, within the Scriptures, mountains are exposed and exposing places – places of clarity and encounter.

And all this and more supplies the interpretative backcloth against which Jesus' transfiguration must be viewed if we are to engage with the mystery it invites us to embrace.

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white.

Notice how, although he'd just confided in Peter, James and John about his forthcoming suffering and death, Jesus remains undiminished. In fact, quite the opposite, he is glorious, as clarity over his mission and purpose begins to emerge. Greater clarity still breaks through when Jesus suddenly finds himself in the company, not only of Peter, James and John, but also of Moses and Elijah – two momentous mountaineers of faith.

Moses the liberator, who, disturbed by the suffering and oppression of his fellow humans, challenged corrupt political regimes in God's name, orchestrating their emancipation, before bringing to expression a universal code of conduct, the Ten Commandments, to incline the wayward wills of all people to the wisdom of God.

Elijah the reformer, who revealed the poverty and perversion of the human heart, and its desire to fashion gods out of anything or anyone capable of indulging our vanity and furthering our will to power. But also Elijah the restorer, who healed the broken, fed the hungry, revived the lifeless, comforted the grief-stricken, lifted up the heads of the downtrodden.

The appearance Moses and Elijah at the transfiguration, then, locates Jesus' ministry within the story of faith narrated through the Hebrew Scriptures and, by so doing, imbues it with meaning and significance.

Yet, more than that, Moses and Elijah, two archetypal figures from Israel's past, demonstrate what God is able to accomplish through those who are willing to take themselves as seriously as God takes them and to dedicate their lives to furthering God's causes and to advancing God's ways – to the pursuit of truth and wisdom, freedom and justice, healing and peace.

As such, Moses and Elijah prefigure what is about to be accomplished through the faithful service and uncompromising self-offering of Jesus, the Human One.

Then, finally, a voice from heaven, reminiscent of his baptismal anointing, reassuring Jesus of his particular role within the household of God whilst authorising his chosen course of action.

While Peter was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, 'This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!'

Looking back over two thousand years, it can be difficult for us to relate to Jesus' Transfiguration because, at a superficial level, it seems so incredible, so other-worldly, so inconceivable. And perhaps it's not particularly helpful to try to make sense of it in terms of what actually happened and how.

Instead, perhaps we should interpret it more as a lens through which to view Jesus' ministry – a mountain-top perspective, if you will – and, by doing so, to recognise God not only in what was accomplished through Jesus' ministry in The Galilee, in all those life-affirming encounters of healing, hospitality and celebration ...

... but also in what would begin to unfold as he entered Jerusalem one final time, only to be arrested by those who felt threatened by the good news he embodied, before being exposed to extreme torture, violence and abuse, and then to suffer one of the cruellest forms of execution ever devised.

In truth, it can be difficult to find God in Jesus' Passion, just as it can be difficult to find God in our own sufferings or the sufferings of others – not so dissimilar, I suppose, from looking for the sun on a cloud-shrouded summit.

And yet the profound truth at the heart of the Christian Way, is that God can be found in the darkest of human experience – not looking in from beyond, as a dispassionate or impotent observer, but, in some sense, suffering with us – supplying those needful resources of faith, hope and love, whilst reassuring us that there is a greater truth about who we are that transcends the suffering and diminishment of the present moment – a truth residing within the loving communion of God.

And if this is the testimony of the Transfiguration, then it is surely as relevant today as it ever was, because if we have learned anything through the passage of time it is surely that suffering in its many guises characterises the human condition and is never far away – threatening to overwhelm us and starve our lives of meaning.

What we need to survive in this life – more so, to flourish – is not a faith that can rescue us from suffering (which is just as well, because that won't happen), but one that can sustain us through it, preserving our humanity – at times, helping us to find meaning in it, even to redeem it.

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