



Opening Prayer

God of light, Light of light, Light in our darkness, Light to pierce even brightness ... Shine on us. When we see truth, please bless us. In the darkness, light our way. In our sinfulness, forgive. When we have hope, renew us. For Jesus' sake.

StF no. 135 Christ, whose glory fills the skies

Christ, whose glory fills the skies,
Christ, the true, the only Light,
Sun of Righteousness, arise,
triumph o'er the shades of night;
Day-spring from on high, be near;
Day-star, in my heart appear.

Dark and cheerless is the morn
unaccompanied by thee;
joyless is the day's return,
till thy mercy's beams I see,
till they inward light impart,
glad my eyes, and warm my heart.

Visit then this soul of mine;
pierce the gloom of sin and grief;
fill me, radiance divine;
scatter all my unbelief;
more and more thyself display,
shining to the perfect day.

Charles Wesley (1707-1788)

Prayer

The earth is full of your glory, Creator God: the beauty of the natural world, its order and design, its intricacy and immensity, its strength and delicacy; the provision that is made for humankind, for animals, for plants. The earth is full of your glory, Creator God.

The Gospel is full of your glory, Son of God; the beauty of your self-emptying love, the holy child born in the stable, the young man named by God at his baptism, the man of sorrows hanging on the cross; the gift of yourself for humankind, in your teaching, your healing, your dying and your rising again. The Gospel is full of your glory, Son of God

Your people are full of your glory, Holy Spirit: the beauty of lives illumined by you, loving hearts and willing hands, brave followers and faithful friends, peaceful souls and children of encouragement; a people made one in you, whose lives shine out like lamps in a dark world. Your people are full of your glory, Holy Spirit.

Creator, Son and Holy Spirit, we praise you for your glory.

New Testament Reading: Matthew 17: 1 – 9

The Transfiguration

Six days later Jesus took with him Peter and the brothers James and John and led them up a high mountain where they were alone. As they looked on, a change came over Jesus: his face was shining like the sun, and his clothes were dazzling white. Then the three disciples saw Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus. So Peter spoke up and said to Jesus, "Lord, how good it is that we are here! If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

While he was talking, a shining cloud came over them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my own dear Son, with whom I am pleased—listen to him!" When the disciples heard the voice, they were so terrified that they threw themselves face downward on the ground. Jesus came to them and touched them. "Get up," he said. "Don't be afraid!" So they looked up and saw no one there but Jesus. As they came down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Don't tell anyone about this vision you have seen until the Son of Man has been raised from death."

Reflection on this 'Drama'

The setting – a high mountain that presented a spectacular view over Galilee - would be reminiscent of the third Temptation, when Jesus was promised kingship and power over all he could see if he worshipped Satan. Jesus has taken time out from the pressures and busyness of his ministry in Galilee. He often sought physical and spiritual refreshment by withdrawing to the seclusion of the mountains to think and pray. It was also symbolic, as Jews knew the mountains as a setting for God to make himself known to his people.

On this occasion, an ordinary walk changes into something awesome: as Jesus prays, his face and clothes undergo a remarkable change, becoming dazzlingly bright. We do not know the timescale, but Luke tells us he prays for long enough for the disciples to fall asleep. (Surely quite natural after a strenuous activity in a hot climate?)

The 'Cast': Peter, James and John - Jesus' closest friends – were with him on several key occasions, and witnessed the highest and lowest parts of his earthly life.

Moses and Elijah were forerunners of God's kingdom. Each had played a major role in history, establishing God's relationship with his people, and had his own mountain-top experience of God: Moses on Mt. Sinai (Ex. 19) was covered by a cloud, and a voice confirmed him as God's appointed representative. The giving of the Law to Moses was the most significant Old Testament event. Elijah, also on Mt. Sinai (I Kings 19) was at a very low ebb when God demonstrated his power in an earthquake, furious wind and fire, before using the 'soft whisper of a voice' to encourage and instruct him.

Thus we find key representatives of the **written** word and **spoken** word communing with Jesus, the **Living** Word. Their work was vital in preparing the way; Jesus was to finish the job.

Imagine the reaction of the three disciples when they awoke! They had witnessed something magnificent - Jesus in his glory with two of the most eminent characters in history - but had little idea what it meant. And how terrifying is any powerful phenomenon that cannot be explained!

Tabernacles ('booths' in modern translation) were shelters made from branches and leaves. The Feast of Booths commemorated the Exodus, and surely this spectacle evoked that historic event, while the glimpse into the future presaged a time when God would 'tabernacle' (live permanently) with his people.

Peter might have been desperate not to let the glory fade, but to hold on to these revered patriarchs for ever. Or at least (as a good Jew) to show respect by offering some form of hospitality. Already he had recognised Jesus' identity as the Messiah (Matt.16) but his insistence that nothing bad should befall Jesus indicated that he had not fully worked out the nature of that Messianic role.

Did another flash of insight create a link to a later event, another glimpse of God's glory through Jesus, but this time on a different – and ugly – hill outside Jerusalem? When glory was replaced by humiliation; shining white clothes by nakedness; two great heroes of the faith by criminals on each side; bright cloud by darkness over the land. When the same Peter did not express wonder, but denied knowing this Messiah and hid in shame; when it was not God proclaiming his 'beloved Son', but a pagan soldier declaring him 'the Son of God'.

If so, was he desperately seeking a means to prolong this rapture and delay Jesus' suffering? Or trying to hurry events along, leaping ahead to the great culmination of the future Exodus, when the people would complete their earthly pilgrimage and celebrate God's permanent presence with them? But Jesus' death had to happen first, and Peter had to learn that such an experience could not be stored, controlled or conjured up at the will of humans. It could only be wondered at.

Scholars suggest that the sheer oddity or clumsiness of Peter's response confirms the event as real: no-one wanting their story to be believed would make up such a comic script which reduces the whole tone into a farce! However, we are all capable of gabbling nonsense if an unfamiliar and incomprehensible situation is sprung on us. It was typical of Peter to blurt out something – anything

- before weighing it up. He may simply have been quite out of his depth, and trying to bring a comfortable degree of normality to an over-awing situation. Later he was to write:

“We have not depended on made-up stories in making known to you the mighty coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. With our own eyes we saw his greatness. We were there when he was given honour and glory by God the Father... We ourselves heard this voice coming from heaven, when we were with him on the holy mountain”. (2 Peter 1)

Cloud traditionally represented God’s dwelling place, a sign of his presence. Later it would be associated with the Ascension and Second Coming. But Jews would know occurrences earlier in history.

The Voice is God affirming Jesus as his Son, to be obeyed: a very rare physical communication with his people, linking directly with Jesus’ Baptism and confirming that he is on the right path.

Suddenly finding themselves alone the disciples must have wondered if it had been a dream or hallucination. If so, it was imagined by them all. How agonising for his closest friends to experience something so phenomenal but not mention it until Jesus had died and risen! Would others not see a change - a barely-contained excitement - and expect an explanation?

Earlier in his ministry Jesus had already been disclosing to his friends glimpses of God’s kingdom denied to those without the eyes of faith. As the darkest day for the human race approached, there was a desperate need for hope and reassurance.

This incident was a pivot between the build-up through the history that preceded, and the act of redemption to follow. It is just one of many examples where Jesus brings a bit of Heaven into human life - a taste of eternity when the physical and temporal realm will be one with the spiritual.

Certain events, exceptionally good or bad, on a global scale or in our personal lives, will always be remembered. Events that involve our most profound emotions, having such impact that for a time we lose sight of everything else. Among them, are there spiritual “highs” for us - when we feel “on the Mountain top”, and have met with God in an especially intimate way?

Such dramatic experiences are not our norm; indeed, by seeking permanent mountain-top experiences and relying on these to maintain our faith, we may overlook our call to live and witness predominantly ‘down in the valley’, among ordinary people, in the harsh hurly-burly of life around us. That is where our Christian work awaits us. But while immersed in the needs of the present world, we can glimpse beyond the everyday into the real and future world of God’s glorious eternity. We can establish a rhythm of worship and work, reflection and action. Did Jesus not tell Martha and Mary that both have a place?

God still pleads with his people, “Jesus is my Son - listen to him.” We need to step back regularly from the daily bustle, make space to be ourselves, quietly focus on God, be overcome with awe, feel his presence and know who Jesus is. Daily in quiet meditation - alone and effectively face to face with God - we should let him speak so his voice is heard. Then radiate his glory to others.

Prayers

Lord, reveal your glory to the world: the glory of suffering, healing love.

Lord, we pray for the nations who glory in the display of their might: the gleaming weapons, the organised destruction of lives and communities, the misconstrued application of physical power.

Lord, we pray for the nations who glory in the display of their wealth: the shining edifices built for the powerful, the shops bejewelled with exotic, foreign food, while the houses of the poor leak and crumble, and peoples abroad, and even on their doorsteps, hunger and starve.

Lord, we pray for the church glorying in the brightness of fellowship and worship: the colour and custom of traditional celebrations, the cheerful noise of enjoyable praise sometimes drowning the voice of challenge, sometimes covering over the darkness of sin, the reality of pain and despair.

Lord, we pray for our society, which glories in success - the spacious home in the clean, green suburb, the sparkling ornaments of travel, clothes and cars - while those who feel the strain of keeping up

or the pain of failure resort to the bottle, to solvents or drugs, to give false glory to grey, troubled lives.

Lord, reveal your glory to the world: the glory of suffering, healing love.

Lord, teach us to glory only in you, that our lives, however dull and hard they may seem, might be transfigured into the glorious life of your kingdom. In Christ's name, Amen.

The Lord's Prayer: *Our Father ...*

Many years before her death my mother made it known to the family that she wished the following hymn to be sung at her funeral: "*Because by then the Lord cannot tell me to return to the nitty-gritty of human life, but will have welcomed me into his glorious presence for eternity*".

Methodist Hymn Book no. 586 (Tune: Unde et memores ... or quietly read.)

Stay, Master, stay upon this heavenly hill;
A little longer, let us linger still;
With all the mighty ones of old beside,
Near to the awe-ful Presence still abide;
Before the throne of light we trembling stand,
And catch a glimpse into the spirit-land.

Stay, Master, stay! We breathe a purer air;
This life is not the life that waits us there'
Thoughts, feeling, flashes, glimpses come and go;
We cannot speak them – nay, we do not know;
Wrapt in this cloud of light we seem to be
The thing we fain would grow – eternally.

No, saith the Lord, the hour is past, we go;
Our home, our life, our duties lie below.
While here we kneel upon the mount of prayer,
The plough lies waiting in the furrow there.
Here we sought God that we might know his will;
There we must do it, serve him, seek him still.

Samuel Greg (1804-76)

A blessing

Lord, transfigure our lives with the glory of your love. Fill us with the light of your Spirit, that in all our dealings with other people, in all that we think and do and say, your glory may be revealed.

This act of worship compiled by Pat Maidment CCL 155789

