

## **Sermon for 15th February 2026, Year A, Last before Lent**

### **Preached at St John's Baillieston**

### **Matthew 17:1-9 – The Transfiguration**

#### **Sermon**

I think artists and photographers share an important insight into the nature of transcendent beauty - that momentary glimpse of something deeper that takes our breath away and gives us momentary power to see everything differently. The insight is that when it comes to visual art, the object you are depicting or the composition of the scene you are photographing, matters infinitely less than the relationship of that subject to the light.

You can be in the midst of the most magnificent mountains and grandest lochs of Scotland, with the most pleasing composition and perfect arrangement of the different elements of the scene, but without a sudden shaft of golden light, it will remain flat, dull, and strangely uninspiring. Conversely, cast the late afternoon or early morning light on the still life scene of a single apple, and it can evoke emotion and transcendence. What induces the response is not the object itself, but what the light reveals about it.

As I started to write this sermon, a brief shaft of morning sun suddenly burst from behind the seemingly never-ending clouds and lit up my room, warming the room instantly by a couple of degrees, and transporting me back to a moment in my twenties when I awoke at a friend's house in Brighton and the light was dancing across my face, and the sounds of seagulls filled the air, and for a brief moment my entire being was held in a transcendent moment of bliss, in which there was no pain, no suffering and trauma from the past, and no fear or anxiety for the future. And I simply breathed. In and out.

This is what contemplatives call a theophany – a sudden experience of the divine so overwhelming that it pushes away every darkness of the soul, all distress and worry, all pain and suffering, all hopes and ambitions, and for a moment there is nothing but God, and, as Julian of Norwich put it, ‘all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.’

It's not that our illnesses go away, our traumas are immediately healed, or our fears for the future are revealed to be unfounded, but in that moment of the revelation of God's presence, his tender care for us, we see the divine reality that underpins and overshadows our being, and suddenly we fall to the ground with gratitude and humility, and we become poets.

It is a paradox that these moments of transcendence, of Transfiguration, most often come in times of extreme trauma and heightened anxiety. Julian of Norwich had almost died from sickness when she received her revelations of divine love. And Peter, James and John accompany Jesus up the mountainside freshly worried and anxious that their mentor, friend, and Lord, is heading inexorably towards his own torture and death.

They are desperate to find alternatives. Their minds and hearts are full of fear and distress, and plans for alternative futures where Jesus doesn't have to die. They want to save Jesus from the heartache to come. It is a very human moment, and one we all know ourselves. We glimpse it in a hospital room where two people have heard the worst news, and the patient reaches out to comfort the healthy one that all will be well. And we glimpse it also on the news in the middle of a disaster, in one person's grace-filled self-sacrifice for the sake of another person the world might rather forget.

Former Archbishop Robert Runcie once daringly said in a sermon responding to the Zeebrugge ferry disaster of 1987 that “where there is suffering, there is Holy Ground.” These are the moments in which we may see that God is present in

suffering and sacrifice, just as God is present in the transcendent beauty of sunlight inspiring within us moments of bliss.

As we approach the beginning of the season of Lent, we must face once again the awful knowledge that there is nothing we can do, or could have done, to prevent the crucifixion of our beloved Lord. Nor can we prevent the stories of loss in our own lives, the suffering friend, the incurable illness, the relationships that cannot be healed, the ravages of old age. But likewise, there is also no way we can shield ourselves from the light of God that bursts forth with hope in our darkest moments. The mountainside transfiguration of Jesus, revealed and glorified in the sudden light of divine revelation, is the way that God prepared a human band of companions for a sacred journey back down the mountain and into the awful road ahead.

Maryetta Anschutz, the American Episcopal priest whose insights inspired much of this sermon, writes that “The moment of transfiguration is that point at which God says to the world and to each of us that there is nothing we can do to prepare for or stand in the way of joy or sorrow. We cannot build God a monument, and we cannot keep God safe. We also cannot escape the light that God will shed on our path. We cannot escape God, Immanuel among us. God will find us in our homes and in our workplaces. God will find us when our hearts are broken and when we discover joy. God will find us when we run away from God and when we are sitting in the middle of what seems like hell.”

But when God does come to us, he humbles himself so that we can receive him. After the overwhelming Transfiguration, when Peter, James and John are forced to the ground and overcome by fear, Jesus comes and reaches out to them with the simplest human gesture – touch. God, whose greatness is so vast that the universe cannot contain it, communicates everything that God hopes for us in an ordinary human touch, and in the words, “Do not be afraid.”

God comes to us gently, that we may come close and yet not fear. God's glory is so much beyond our capacity that we can take only about as much as a human hand can hold.

Perhaps this is why we worship in grand old buildings, through which the light streams sideways on sunny days like a transfiguration, banishing our fears and pain in moments of suspended bliss, breathing God's presence deep into our lungs. But God steps out of the glory, humbles himself and comes to us in a crumb of bread and sip of wine, just as much of God as a human hand can hold.