

Transfiguration of our Lord (6 August)

Luke 9.28-36

St Luke's, Chelsea

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What happens for you when you pray? Perhaps prayer for you most easily comes when there is a task with which you would like God's help. The poet Wendy Cope neatly sums up one fervent prayer uttered by believers and unbelievers alike:

When I went out shopping, I said a little prayer:
 'Jesus, help me park the car for you are everywhere.'
*Jesus, in His goodness and grace,
 Jesus found me a parking space
 In a very convenient place.
 Sound the horn and praise Him!*¹

Or maybe you recognise that prayer rightly takes many more forms than just this reductive invocation of a divine Alexa. You decide you want to join in prayer where you give thanks to God for good things that have happened, or prayer that celebrates God for who God is, or you want to engage in intercessory prayer for other people. You want, in other words, to engage in prayer in its fullest sense of communion with God.

So you sit down at home. You've wisely chosen a chair that's comfortable but not *too* comfortable. You've minimised distractions. And so you close your eyes and begin to pray. But then what happens? Well, if you are anything like me it is a real mix. I enjoy some moments when I feel I am really praying. I enjoy the stillness. I name before God the people I know who would value God's grace in their lives. But all too easily I yawn. I recall the groceries I need to pick up later for dinner. The cat comes and wants a scratch. Prayer is both the most natural thing in the world, and not natural at all.

Whatever happens when you pray, it is probably quite distinct from the moment we heard of in today's gospel reading. Jesus, we are told, 'went up on the mountain to pray'. (It is intriguing that it is only Luke who sets the Transfiguration in this context of prayer, though to enquire why is a question for another day.) And, Luke goes on, 'while [Jesus] was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white'. Moses and Elijah appear, the voice of God speaks from the cloud ... and all of

¹ Quoted in Mark Oakley, *The Collage of God*, p.69

a sudden everything is back to normal, and Peter, James, John and Jesus are alone together on a deserted mountaintop.

This, we might quickly conclude, is a rather more exciting result of prayer than we are used to. Jesus goes on the mountain to pray, and is transfigured in dazzling white and talks with Moses and Elijah. We sit to pray and get a stiff leg. So I want to reflect on this very question: what is the relationship between the events of the transfiguration and our own lives of prayer?

On the one hand, we might immediately point out that we are not Jesus. It is to be expected that our prayer takes a slightly different form. Matthew, Mark and Luke all describe the Transfiguration as a way of pointing to the iridescent relationship that the human Jesus enjoyed with his Father. For all the tiredness and human emotion that Jesus showed, we might hear the gospel writers saying, the Transfiguration is a sign that the human Jesus was one with his heavenly Father. We mere humans, then, can hardly expect our prayers this side of heaven to be shot through with glory.

And indeed those who have dedicated their lives to prayer would often recognise this. Take, for instance, the comment of the Dominican friar, Herbert McCabe, who taught at Oxford for three decades. 'There are satisfying experiences', he says:

that are immediately satisfying like drinking good Irish whiskey, but there are other satisfactions that only occur over a long time, like having a decently-furnished room. A well-furnished room is not breathtakingly beautiful (like the Irish whiskey) but it is very satisfying to live with, and if you get rid of it simply because it doesn't give you an immediate kick, you will notice the lack of it only maybe a time later.

Prayer, he continues, is similar. It is not usually:

a deeply satisfying experience. It is true I hardly ever get a kick out of it ... but if you are deprived of, say, a decent liturgy for a fairly long period of time you discover an important gap in your emotional life.²

If you don't participate in prayer, you will notice it. And note how for McCabe prayer is not simply sitting down on your own. Prayer is also taking part in worship together, as we are doing right now. In our liturgy we engage in worship of God, penitence, thanksgiving, intercessory prayer and pray for ourselves. We are constantly offer prayer, in many different forms, aware that it may not always have the excitement of, say, a theme park ride.

Our prayer will not always be vivid. But, on the other hand, it is a great pity if it is never vivid. I remember, for example, travelling in 2016 with friends to the

² Herbert McCabe, *God Still Matters*, p.64

Spanish monastery of Montserrat. You may well have been there, as it's a popular tourist destination. You travel out of Barcelona on the train for half an hour. You then change to the rack and pinion railway that grinds its way up the mountain until, 700 metres up, you reach the plateau in the rock where Montserrat monastery is located. During the day it is packed. But if you are staying, as we were, by 6pm the only sounds are of the buzzards circling over the mountain peak 500 metres further up. And I remember wandering into the church early one morning and having the vivid sense that I was somewhere otherworldly, where prayer had been offered for centuries. I wandered up the stairs – empty that early in the morning, that lead you to high above the high altar, almost within touching distance of the sculpture of the Virgin. What to do when I reached her? I didn't know. But I knew that this was a special place. After all, it was here – in front of the famous sculpture of the Virgin of Montserrat, that Ignatius of Loyola laid down his soldier's garb and began his journey towards the foundation of the Jesuits. I paused, and felt a stillness. And as I wandered out of the church and into the chilly April air of that mountain, I sensed I had been in what those more poetic than me have called a 'thin place'.

Take a moment to call to mind such moments. When has the world felt shot through with the glory of God? When have your prayers – your worship, your thanksgiving, your intercessory prayer, your prayer for yourself – felt at one with what God may want for the world?

Learning to pray is a lifelong journey which we are all on – myself included. We may absorb brief tips. 'Let your prayer', says one early teacher of prayer, 'be frequent and brief'.³ The words of others sometimes describe what we cannot find the words to say ourselves. Sometimes just saying the Lord's Prayer is a good idea. Stick at it: like tidying your house, it can often feel thankless at the time, but forms us deeply in our relationship to the world, to other people, and to God.

And perhaps the Transfiguration offers one final illumination of what it is to pray. For it is by God's action that Jesus is suddenly seen in dazzling white. In similar fashion, prayer is not a work we perform for a passive God. It is our act of opening our hearts and minds and saying to God: 'Here I am. Please work, and act, and love, in me.' And over time, we too may find ourselves transformed. We may notice a difference in the movement of our hearts, and minds, and hands. And when we do so, we may say that we are both becoming more fully alive, and being prepared, one day, to see the dazzling glory of God.

³ John Cassian, quoted in Rowan Williams, *Being Christian*, p.78