** Bamford Chapel and Norden United Reformed Church**

 **Sunday 14th February 2021**

I hope that you are all keeping well and taking care. Welcome to worship, whether you are alone or in the company of familywelcome one and all. Our service today is certainly different from what we are used too. No need to put on our Sunday best, no need to go out in the rain (as I write the long distance weather forecast for today). Just relax in the presence of God.



**Call to Worship**

From the rising of the sun until its setting, the Lord God has spoken. God shines out perfect in beauty.
Our God is coming and will not keep silent.
The heavens proclaim God’s justice, for God himself is judge.
Come worship the Lord our God with me.
Come celebrate his faithfulness.
Come to the mountain of transfiguration and be blessed.
**Amen.**

**Hymn** Lord, the light of your love is shining

in the midst of the darkness, shining;

Jesus, light of the world, shine upon us;

set us free by the truth you now bring us,

shine on me, shine on me.

*Shine, Jesus, shine, fill this land with the Father's glory;*

*blaze, Spirit, blaze, set our hearts on fire.*

*Flow, river, flow, flood the nations with grace and mercy;*

*send forth your word, Lord, and let there be light.*

Lord, I come to your awesome presence,

from the shadows into your radiance;

by your blood I may enter your brightness:

search me, try me, consume all my darkness.

shine on me, shine on me

*Chorus*

Graham Kendrick
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As we gaze on your kingly brightness

so our faces display your likeness,

ever changing from glory to glory:

mirrored here, may our lives tell your story.

shine on me, shine on me.

*Chorus*

**Prayers of adoration, confession and forgiveness**

God of divine power, what a spine-tingling, hair-raising event the disciples experienced!
One minute they were looking upon Jesus, the man.

Next, they were tuned into your glory shining in and through him as he transformed before their eyes: your confirmation of his deity.
Your same radiant light, available to us through relationship with Jesus your Son, transforms our hearts. Your divine Holy Spirit tunes our faith in unexpected ways through the transforming radiance of your love.
**God of life-changing moments, we glorify you.**

Lord, whereas it’s part of our faith walk to seek and be open to life-changing moments,
forgive us when we just plod through life and get despondent with the mundane.
On the other hand, we can at times get fixated on the spiritual mountain-tops and so miss out on what’s happening below in the everyday. When things are going well for us, we can get wrapped up in the moment and be forgetful of others.
There are many voices tuned into today’s world telling us how to live and what’s best.
But you, Lord, are our authority in life.  Forgive us when we fail to test things against your word.
**We are sorry Lord, shine of us we pray**

Jesus’ divine nature was confirmed on the mountain – he is God’s beloved Son.
He went on to suffer; he died and rose again for us, conquering sin and death.
Now he sits at God’s right hand, glorified in heaven – and thanks to him, we are completely forgiven.
**Amen.**

**Lord’s Prayer**

**Reading Psalm 50:1-6 NRSV**

**1**The mighty one, God the Lord, speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting.
**2**Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth.

**3**Our God comes and does not keep silence, before him is a devouring fire, and a mighty tempest all around him.
**4**He calls to the heavens above and to the earth, that he may judge his people:
**5**“Gather to me my faithful ones, who made a covenant with me by sacrifice!”
**6**The heavens declare his righteousness, for God himself is judge.

*****Selah*

**Reading Mark 9:2-9 NRSV**

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, **3**and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. **4**And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. **5**Then Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” **6**He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. **7**Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” **8**Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus. **9**As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

During lockdown I have been trying to sort out the many photographs I have taken over the years and have been reminiscing about some of the places I have been fortunate to visit. When I went the Holy Land one of the places that impressed me was Mount Tabor. It is a large, round hill in central Galilee.

When you go there today with a party of pilgrims, you have to get out of your bus and take a taxi to the top. They say that God is especially pleased with the Mount Tabor taxi-drivers, because more praying goes on in the few minutes hurtling up or down the narrow mountain road in those cars than in the rest of the day, or possibly the week. (I’ve heard that said of other places, too, but at Mount Tabor it’s very believable.) We were lucky that our mode of transport was a mini bus which took us to the top – it was a pretty scary journey. Mount Tabor is the traditional site of the transfiguration and from the top you get a stunning panoramic view of Galilee, spread out in front of you, as you can see from the picture.

In Marks Gospel we have just heard something amazing which happened on a mountain in Galilee. Three of Jesus' friends - Peter, James and John - saw Jesus; shining with God's glory as he prayed. It was one of those times when Peter wanted to reach for the cam­era (except that cameras hadn't been invented then) so they could hold on to the wonderful moment for **j** ever. Perhaps they had never before felt God quite so close to them! They even heard God's voice. He wasn't saying, I hope you're watching carefully and I'm sorry cameras haven't been invented yet or you could have got a pretty dramatic picture here today!'

He was helping them understand the real, actual experience they were in, assuring them that Jesus really was God's Son, and wanting them to listen to Jesus in a way they had never listened before.

**Offertory**

We give you thanks and praise, that you have built us up in faith and bound us together in love. By your grace, may all that we do and all that we have, show the glory of your name and serve the good of your people, through Jesus Christ our Lord Amen

**Hymn** 1. Christ is the world’s true light,
 Its Captain of salvation,
 The Day-star clear and bright
 Of every man and nation;
 New life, new hope awakes,
 Where’er men own his sway;
 Freedom her bondage breaks,
 And night is turned to day.

2. In Christ all races meet,
Their ancient feuds forgetting,
The whole round world complete,
From sunrise to its setting:
When Christ is throned as Lord,
Men shall forsake their fear,
To ploughshare bear the sword,
To pruning-hook the spear.

3. One Lord, in one great Name
Unite us all who own thee;
Cast out our pride and shame
That hinder to enthrone thee;
The world has waited long,
Has travailed long in pain;
To heal its ancient wrong

George Wallace Briggs, 1933

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Come, Prince of Peace, and reign.

Amen.

**Sermon**

Being a sun-worshipper it is easy to understand why, since ancient times, people have worshipped the sun. Quite apart from its dazzling beauty, and its faithfulness in appear­ing each morning, all living things seem to sense that they depend on the sun for survival. Plants grow their first tentative shoots towards it, and adjust their flowering according to the length of daylight. Many flowers turn their heads to follow the sun's progress through the day, and all the com­plexities of animal and plant activity are locked into their relationship with our nearest star. Earth and the other planets in the solar system owe their very development to it.

So it is not surprising that sun like images of fire and light are frequently used to describe the pres­ence of the living God - images which speak of power, essence of life, sustaining support, faithful­ness and beauty that hurts when we look at it directly. Or we can look at it from the other direc­tion and see how God inevitably displays his nature in his creation, and it says a lot about him that the very first word of creation was 'Let there be light!' Creating the sunlight, and a teeming planet's life depending on it, was providing us with clues about the energising Creator, and our dependence on him.

Being dazzled can mean being temporarily blinded, but also amazed and overwhelmed. In the Gospel passage there is, at the same time, a sense of seeing things more acutely, differently – seeing partially (due to the dazzling effect) but also grasping something beyond the immediate view. Is it helpful to think of the dazzling light of the transfigured Christ as ‘the light of the knowledge of the glory of God’ something that totally changes our perception of reality?

Where do we look for the glory of God? What is it? One way to answer is in terms of a ‘light-bulb moment’, when we suddenly perceive or understand something in the life of faith that has previously puzzled or eluded us. This might be triggered by a sunset, a harvest moon, dolphins leaping – all kinds of events and experiences that deepen the sense of wonder in creation and of the greatness of the Creator. Or, indeed, by seeing Christ in another person’s faith or graciousness. Hearing of these experiences can be a great encouragement to any of us. What stories do we have to tell?

It certainly feels entirely appropriate that God's glory, being seen in Jesus as he is transfigured, shows him being lit up, bright and seemingly pure. The people of Israel had in their communal history many stories of fiery encounters with God, such as Moses' burning bush, the pillar of fire guiding and protecting them on their escape from Egypt, the extra person seen in the burning fiery furnace, and the heavenly chariots of fire as Elijah is taken from Elisha's sight. Psalm 50 explores themes of shining light and devouring fire, manifesting God’s presence. God’s voice echoes in the wild wind until the whole creation resounds to words of judgement. The verses used today 1-6 give an image of the greatness of God’s power and glory. All are summoned to see what God reveals to them, which may not be entirely comfortable: God will not keep silence...when judging his people. Peter, in the Gospel, will not escape distress and despair later on, but God will be with him and will bring him through.

Mark’s Gospel is filled with pointers to Jesus’ identity, but in the story of the transfiguration it is as if the curtain is lifted to allow the reader a glimpse of true reality, showing Jesus as divine, as the beloved Son. Peter, who so spectacularly failed in the previous passage, is invited to share in this revelation with James and John, who will also fail. We should not allow our failures to prevent us from seeking more of God, who wants to reveal more of himself to us.

Mark's account of the transfiguration comes immediately after Jesus has been telling his dis­ciples about his necessary suffering and death before he comes into glory. To help them cope with what is ahead they are allowed a fleeting glimpse of the holistic truth, where the glory is evident, so that when it is hidden in the horror of the cross, they may begin to understand what real glory involves.

For the New Testament writers in general, in fact, humanity itself is a glorious thing, and Jesus’ perfect humanity provides the model for the glory which all his people will one day share. If you want to see Jesus’ divinity, the early Christians would tell us, you must look, however surprisingly, at Jesus’ suffering and shameful death. If that seems puzzling, it’s a puzzle the first Christians insisted we should live with.

In fact, the scene at the transfiguration (as it’s normally called) offers a strange parallel and contrast to the crucifixion. If you’re going to meditate on the one, you might like to hold the other in your mind as well, as a sort of backdrop.

* Here, on a mountain, is Jesus, revealed in glory; there, on a hill outside Jerusalem, is Jesus, revealed in shame.
* Here his clothes are shining white; there, they have been stripped off, and soldiers have gambled for them.
* Here he is flanked by Moses and Elijah, two of Israel’s greatest heroes, representing the lawand the prophets; there, he is flanked by two brigands, representing the level to which Israel had sunk in rebellion against God.
* Here, a bright cloud overshadows the scene; there, darkness comes upon the land.
* Here Peter blurts out how wonderful it all is; there, he is hiding in shame after denying he even knows Jesus.
* Here a voice from God himself declares that this is his wonderful son; there, a pagan soldier declares, in surprise, that this really was God’s son.

The mountain-top explains the hill-top - and vice versa. Perhaps we only really understand either of them when we see it side by side with the other. Learn to see the glory in the cross; learn to see the cross in the glory; and you will have begun to bring together the laughter and the tears of the God who hides in the cloud, the God who is to be known in the strange person of Jesus himself. This story is, of course, about being surprised by the power, love and beauty of God. But the point of it is that we should learn to recognize that same power, love and beauty within Jesus, and to listen for it in his voice - not least when he tells us to take up the cross and follow him.

Jesus isn’t just a prophet; he is God’s own son, the Messiah**,** and God is delighted with what he is doing. The word to the disciplesthen is just as much a word to us today. If you want to find the way - the way to God, the way to the Promised Land - you must listen to him.

The Transfiguration makes clear who Jesus is before God. We need to have assurance and reassurance of who we are before God, so that right actions will flow from who we are at the deepest level. If our actions are all over the place, then it may be because we are confused about who we are. This is true of individuals, and of churches. How do we shed falsely created skins, and celebrate growing into the natural child of God we were created to be? God is everywhere, and can be met anywhere. However, it is important to have places where we can go, or turn aside, to focus on God. Holy places help us focus. Memories, stories and atmosphere all help us see God – he is always present; the problem is our not seeing. Or perhaps we see but ignore.

A church building’s visible presence alerts people that this is a place where God has been found. The preparations we make for prayer or worship are not for God’s benefit, but to help us see, meet with and be transformed by God.

Many of us may have had the experience of a spiritually transforming weekend, or worship time. It can leave us feeling blessed and joyful. Then we return to the demands of family life, office politics, difficult neighbours, employment, or money issues.

Mountaintop experiences are best seen as fleeting moments in time leading to a new chapter of sacrifice and service to the glory of God. Mountaintop experiences are important; they’re a gift of God’s grace and love; they’re the catalyst of transformation; they’re not meant to last forever, for they inevitably lead to the valley below. Look at what follows on the heels of Jesus’ transfiguration: He and Peter and James and John come down from the mountaintop only to meet a man with a son who has epilepsy begging for Jesus to heal him.  So much for the ecstasy; there’s work to be done and not a moment to spare.

Someone who had been to the mountaintop was Dr. Martin Luther King, he gave a speech about it on April 3, 1968.  It was given in Memphis, Tennessee, the day before he was assassinated.  It’s entitled; “I’ve been to the Mountaintop” He was there in support of the city sanitation workers, who were on strike.  It reiterates his call for non-violence, the hallmark of his life and witness, and it ends with both a question mark and an exclamation point.  But, rather than paraphrase it for you, here’s the last paragraph in Dr. King’s own words:

“Well, I don’t know what will happen now.
We’ve got some difficult days ahead.
But it doesn’t matter with me now
because I’ve been to the mountaintop.
And I don’t mind.
Like anybody, I would like to live a long life.
Longevity has its place.
But I’m not concerned about that now.
I just want to do God’s will.
And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain.
And I’ve looked over.
And I’ve seen the Promised Land.
I may not get there with you.
But I want you to know tonight,
that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land.
And I’m happy, tonight.
I’m not worried about anything.
I’m not fearing any man.
Mine eyes have seen the glory
of the coming of the Lord.”

May God give us such mountaintop experiences as this; that, by God’s grace, we, too, can be instruments of peace and love and so, help reconcile the world to God. Amen

Let’s say or sing that hymn now

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;

He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;

He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword;

His truth is marching on.
*Glory, glory, hallelujah! Glory, glory, hallelujah!
Glory, glory, hallelujah! His truth is marching on.*

 He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat;

He is sifting out the hearts of men before His judgment seat;
 Oh, be swift, my soul, to answer Him! be jubilant, my feet
Our God is marching on.  *Glory, glory, hallelujah! Glory, glory, hallelujah!
Glory, glory, hallelujah! His truth is marching on.*

In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,
With a glory in His bosom that transfigures you and me:
 As He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free;
While God is marching on
*Glory, glory, hallelujah! Glory, glory, hallelujah!
Glory, glory, hallelujah! His truth is marching on.*

He is coming like the glory of the morning on the wave,
He is wisdom to the mighty, He is succour to the brave;
 So the world shall be His footstool, and the soul of Time His slave,
Our God is marching on.

Julia Ward Howe 1862

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 *Glory, glory, hallelujah! Glory, glory, hallelujah!*

*Glory, glory, hallelujah! His truth is marching on.*

**Intercessions**

The heavens and the earth witness to the transforming power of God. We bring into God’s presence those places and situations that we long to see changed, transformed for the glory of God.

From the mountain-top, we pray for our nation, for those with political power, for those who lead our financial institutions, we pray for integrity and wisdom for all leaders…

From the mountain-top, we pray for those who offer support, especially during this crisis for doctors, nurses, paramedics, health workers and carers, for those working in schools and social services, …

From the mountain-top, we pray for countries torn apart by war and greed, for refugees looking for safety, for those imprisoned for their faith, for those who have nowhere to call home and for those who will go hungry today, we pray for the poor in our community, for those who are unemployed or unable to work, for the very young and the very old, and for those who are alone…

From the mountain-top, we offer to you all who are suffering in mind or body… asking for peace, and for your healing presence in their need…….. we pray for all those estranged from their family and friends by the Covid virus….. we pray for all who are mourning the loss of family members or friends…..

From the mountain top we pray for our church… for our Ministers, leaders, Elders and Officers.
Encourage and strengthen them in their work, give us all fresh vision for the future of church and renew our Imagination, creativity and wisdom as we address financial and ministerial challenges. Turn us towards each other in acts of loving service then turn us outwards to carry your gospel of healing into the world.

From the mountain top we pray for ourselves, for our own journey of discipleship, for courage, steadfast faith, and wisdom, in all we do or say.

**Amen.**

O Lord my God, When I in awesome wonder
Consider all The works Thy Hand hath made,
I see the stars, I hear the mighty thunder,
Thy power throughout the universe displayed,

*Then sings my soul, my Saviour God to thee,*

*How great thou art, how great thou art!*

*Then sings my soul, my Saviour God to thee,*

*How great thou art, how great thou art!*

When through the woods and forest glades I wander
I hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees,
When I look down from lofty mountain grandeur
And hear the brook and feel the gentle breeze,

But when I think that God, his Son not sparing,

send him to die – I scarce can take it in

That on the cross, our burden gladly bearing,

He bled and died to take away our sin

Stuart K Hine (1899 – 1989)

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When Christ shall come with shouts of acclamation,
and take me home - what joy shall fill my heart!

Then shall I bow in humble adoration,

and there proclaim: My God, how great thou art!

**Blessing**

Whether your journey takes you to the mountain-top or the city; whether you go home alone or whether you go with others, go now in confidence, go now in peace.
And may you know the blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, every step of the way through this week and always.