

# Transfiguration Sunday

27.02.2022  
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## Introduction

‘A cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud.’

Watching the change in Jesus’ face, his dazzling clothes, and the appearance of Moses and Elijah during the Transfiguration confirms for Peter the declaration that he made just a few days earlier. Jesus truly is the Messiah. Peter wants to construct three dwellings at the top of the mountain for Jesus, Elijah and Moses. A place to rest and relish in the glory of God.

What Peter is not able, or conceivably not wanting, to see at this moment in time is that with this experience and declaration brings with it a new beginning – one that will bring torture and death and his own denial of knowing Jesus, before the glorious resurrection of Christ. For our passage marks the end of one chapter in the life of Jesus, and with an ending comes a beginning – the journey towards Jerusalem.

And it is not in the clear blue skies with panoramic views at the top of a mountain that God chooses to speak to mark this new chapter in the life of Jesus. But rather when a cloud descends, changing the exhilarating mountain top experience to one of fear and distress and confusion.

As you reflect on this passage, consider when and where you most clearly hear the voice of God. How do you respond?

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## Text

Luke 9:28–43

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. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.

Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah”—not knowing what he said. While he 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!” When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. Just then a man from the crowd shouted, “Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not.” Jesus answered, “You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here.” While he was coming, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. And all were astounded at the greatness of God.

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## Comment

The Transfiguration is an awesome encounter of Jesus clothed in heavenly glory – a glimpse of the inner identity of Jesus that is normally concealed through his earthly body. Throughout the gospels we see Jesus as a miraculous healer, as a person to challenge prejudice and speak with those society casts out, as the one who seeks justice for the least powerful. Within all of this, Jesus gives indications of his heritage – the Son of God – but this encounter on top of a mountain is only the second time it is seen in this visible form, the first time being when the dove descended on him at his baptism, declaring Jesus to be the Son of God. The Greek word for transfiguration is *metamorpho*, meaning to metamorphose, to transform, to change. And this is what Peter sees Jesus experience on the top of this mountain – Jesus’ face changed and his clothes became dazzling white.

A few days prior to the walk up this mountain, Peter responds to a question by declaring that Jesus is indeed the Messiah of God. He is not Elijah the prophet, or Moses representing the law – two of the most important figures in Judaism. Peter, it seems, has grasped the identity of Jesus. This is not just a moment of delight of being at the top of the mountain, but also the confirmation that his earlier statement of Jesus being the Messiah was now shown to be true.

It is not surprising then, that when he sees Jesus clothed in glory he wants to hold onto this moment. Tired though Peter is, he is eager to build three dwellings: one for Jesus, one for Moses and one for Elijah. Jesus is, after all, his close friend and companion. Yet he is also holy and God. Building these dwellings would seem like a fitting act of worship to Jesus. An act of selflessness and honour. An act that would require energy and strength of character.

The dwellings Peter speaks about refer to the Feast of Booths, a feast where the Israelites lived in tents or booths, celebrating both the harvest, and the exodus from Egypt – the start of a journey to the promised land. A journey that was to those Israelites unknown and challenging. A path that they hadn’t travelled before and was to be full of new experiences. A journey to a land of their own. But Peter’s proposal is cut short by a cloud descending, by the voice of God and by the departure of Moses and Elijah.

Peter has yet to fully understand that in identifying Jesus as the Messiah, he is also

identifying the one who has yet to travel to Jerusalem, face brutal imprisonment by the authorities, and die a painful and humiliating death. With the ending of one journey is the beginning of the next. For in this moment on the hillside, Peter sees Jesus in glory. He sees Jesus as he wants to see him, not able, yet, to comprehend the journey that is now starting – the journey towards Jerusalem. A journey that will end in another new beginning, when Jesus is in his full resurrected glory as the Son of God.

And so Peter's idea is dismissed and the mountain-top experience is changed. No longer in clear skies at the top of the mountain, in awe of the glory of Christ. Now clothed in a terrifying cloud that overwhelms them. A darker and more pressing environment, where visibility is poor. And it is in this damp dark space that God chooses to speak, to confirm that Jesus is indeed his son, that the disciples are to listen to him.

Peter met with Jesus in a powerful way on this mountain top. He saw first-hand that Jesus is the Messiah. Yet he heard the voice of God while he was terrified inside a dark cloud, before a journey that was to be agonising for both Jesus and his disciples.

And Peter chose to listen, for he becomes the rock on which Jesus builds his Church. But for now, he descends the mountain and is with Jesus as he performs a miracle. The disciples, unable to see Jesus in all his glory, are not able to cast out the demon from the boy. Jesus uses this to again highlight his identity to the disciples – that they might begin to see the journey that is to be travelled before death and resurrection can occur, before Peter too begins a new journey after the resurrection of Jesus.

Later, Peter writes of this experience, 'For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honour and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain' (2 Peter 1:16–18).

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## Response

When have you heard the voice of God? After an exhilarating experience when Jesus has become known to you? In the darkness of a terrible moment? In the daily rhythm of life?

This is the account of one person meeting with Jesus in a dark cave when life had become exceptionally low, incredibly dark and very challenging. Of feeling the presence of God when there was no light. Of hearing the sounds around and knowing that even in this damp, dark place, there is life.

*'I took the entrance into the quarries through a tunnel about 400 feet long. It is not possible to stand upright in this tunnel and there is no natural light. Standing at this quarry face I turned off my torch and experienced a darkness that seemed paralysing, overpowering and oppressive. This is the moment that comes closest to explaining the dark internal struggle that I was faced with at this point in my life.'*

*As I stood in this darkness, I experienced several feelings and emotions. At first it was fear. A fear of the unknown, not really knowing where I was or what might be happening*

*around me. I found myself praying out loud. Nothing elaborate – God, please help me... (help me to find the way through this tunnel that is affecting so much of my life).*

*And as I stood, I began to listen. At first what I took to be silence... but it wasn't, there was breathing from a friend stood by my side and the sound of water dripping on the rocks.*

*The longer I stayed still, listening in the darkness, the more aware of my surroundings I became. The longer I stood, the less intimidating the darkness became. The longer I stood, the more confident I became just to stand and wait. God was here in this dark damp quarry. God was with me in my struggle for life.*

*Eventually turning on our torches, we re-joined the main tunnel and climbed up into the main chamber of this small network of inter-linked quarries above Little Langdale. It was like entering a beautiful oasis. At the centre were trees, plants, birds and daylight from 2 'windows' high up in the quarry. We sat there for a long time before continuing our walk, passing through several other tunnels. These were wider, lighter, less oppressive and eventually led to a stunning view as the tunnels peeled out onto the valley.'*

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## Prayer

At times we are confused about our own identity  
Where we have come from  
Who we are now.

And in this moment we can forget that  
Your identity was questioned  
Your love rejected  
Your friendship tossed aside.

We ask that in those mountain-top experiences  
We don't lose focus of our discipleship with you  
We ask that in those moments of darkness  
We are able to be still, and wait to hear Your voice

As we journey in faith  
Let us, like Peter, be able to say that  
We have heard Your voice  
While we were in a holy place.  
Amen

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## Further Reading

*Now available via the [Resources](#) section of the website: recordings of Pádraig Ó Tuama's Advent conversations with contributors to the Spirituality of Conflict book.*

'what were you arguing about along the way?' is a newly revised and edited collection of Spirituality of Conflict entries for years A, B and C. This volume contains introductions, reflections, responses and prayers for the seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent and Easter.

Pat Bennett, the theologian, scientist and liturgist (and part of the Spirituality of Conflict team since it began) has spent hundreds of hours reading through the entries, selecting and editing those entries that work well together, and compiling

them together in a volume of resources that is rich with support for everyone, whether using it in preparation for preaching, or for personal or group learning. You can get it from all good bookshops, or online venues. If you can order directly from [Canterbury Press](#), or through your local bookshop, we'd be extra pleased!

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Season: Epiphany

Themes: Inner Journey