

Scripture Reading for March 3rd 2019

Luke 9:28-43a (NIV)

²⁸ About eight days after Jesus said this, he took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray. ²⁹ As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. ³⁰ Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. ³¹ They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem. ³² Peter and his companions were very sleepy, but when they became fully awake, they saw his glory and the two men standing with him. ³³ As the men were leaving Jesus, Peter said to him, “Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” (He did not know what he was saying.)

³⁴ While he was speaking, a cloud appeared and covered them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. ³⁵ A voice came from the cloud, saying, “This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him.”

³⁶ When the voice had spoken, they found that Jesus was alone. The disciples kept this to themselves and did not tell anyone at that time what they had seen.

³⁷ The next day, when they came down from the mountain, a large crowd met him. ³⁸ A man in the crowd called out, “Teacher, I beg you to look at my son, for he is my only child. ³⁹ A spirit seizes him and he suddenly screams; it throws him into convulsions so that he foams at the mouth. It scarcely ever leaves him and is destroying him. ⁴⁰ I begged your disciples to drive it out, but they could not.” ⁴¹ “You unbelieving and perverse generation,” Jesus replied, “how long shall I stay with you and put up with you? Bring your son here.” ⁴² Even while the boy was coming, the demon threw him to the ground in a convulsion. But Jesus rebuked the impure spirit, healed the boy and gave him back to his father. ⁴³ And they were all amazed at the greatness of God.

Sermon: The Transforming Jesus

In our reading this morning, Luke tells us that Jesus withdrew to the mountain with Peter, John, and James *to pray*.¹ In was in *that* context that the three disciples witnessed the transformed Christ talking with Moses and Elijah about what he was going to accomplish in Jerusalem, and then heard the divine voice from the cloud, saying, “This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him.”² Important though the Transfiguration is in the gospel accounts of Jesus’ ministry, today I want to begin a short series on *Prayer*. In future Sundays I will speak on the Lord’s Prayer, but I want to first lay some foundations.³

Christians often conclude their prayers with the words, “in Jesus name” or “through Jesus Christ our Lord.” *Why* do we do that? Before we can respond to that, we must first address a preliminary question: “*Who is Jesus Christ?*” Indeed, Peter, John, and James came away from the Mount of Transfiguration

¹ Luke 9:28. (Indeed, only Luke makes this point; see also Mark 9:2-12; Matt 17:1-9.)

² Luke 9:28-36.

³ I acknowledge Douglas John Hall, *When You Pray* (Judson Press, PA, 1987) as providing the basis for this sermon.

with that exact same question on their minds, and all the gospel writers, each in their own way, respond to that fundamental issue in their accounts. This question is important because *what* we think about Jesus and his saving work will colour everything we think about prayer. And if our thinking about Christ is confused, or only half-formed, our “theology of prayer” will certainly reflect this inadequacy. Of course, that doesn’t mean *anyone’s* understanding of Jesus is *truly* “adequate” or even complete; we have to be honest and humble, and recognise there will always be an element of mystery. Nevertheless, Jesus put the question to his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?”⁴ And therefore every Christian, regardless of where we are on our faith journey, has some sort of guiding or overriding *image* of Jesus and what God is doing through him. So, to begin with, I want to consider four controlling pictures of Jesus and consider in what ways they affect *how* we pray.

First, many Christians focus *principally* on the *divine origin* of Jesus. Now no one is trying to minimise the teachings of Jesus, his compassion as a healer, his prophetic denunciations of the religious and civil leaders and their practices, nor his suffering and death on the cross. Nevertheless, it is Christ’s *divinity*, not his humanity, that is stressed and, in light of that, when we consider what was accomplished for us through his saving acts, our response is to pursue becoming *more holy*. Through prayer and discipline, we acknowledge our new grace-filled identity “in Christ” and seek to become more like him - in the power of the Spirit.⁵ And often this has a strong “other-worldly” or *purely spiritual* emphasis to reality.⁶

The second image is one of a *conquering* Jesus. Sometimes the fascination with Christ’s divinity is combined with a more political idea of divine sovereignty to produce a picture of Jesus as a conqueror. After all, an important image of God in the Old Testament is of an almighty *King* who would fight Israel’s battles. We often say Jesus fought and won the decisive battle against Satan, or Death, or Sin, or the “principalities and powers.”⁷ And it’s all too easy to translate that image to *our* earthly enemies and to view Jesus as on our side, or fighting for our country’s cause.⁸ And even in the context of mission, some speak of “conquering the world for Christ.” We no longer sing, “Onward Christian Soldiers,” and we have to be frequently reminded of the words of Jesus to Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world.”⁹

The next image is that of an *angry, judgemental* Jesus. Some churches present Jesus as one who is about to destroy the world because it’s considered no longer redeemable. Only those who are chosen by God, “the elect,” are saved and the vast majority will be judged and destroyed. Prayer in this view is a means to escape the Last Judgement or hell and to ensure that they are part of the select elect!

Many of you at this point may *not* recognise any of these three images of Jesus; much depends on your upbringing. This next image may be more familiar, that of an *accepting* Jesus. The great Karl Barth was

⁴ Mark 8:29; Matt 16:15.

⁵ Being “in Christ” is seen as being incorporated into his *divinity*. (This theme began with the Patristic Fathers.)

⁶ Clearly, there is some truth to this image. However, the Christian story is that, since the beginning of creation, God has been intimately involved in history, culminating in the *incarnation*, Christ’s humiliation on the cross and ultimate glorification in the resurrection. Not only does God reveal his nature and purposes through Jesus, he also reveals what being truly human means. We need to be careful if our end goal is to translate human beings *out* of the world that God has made.

⁷ See Eph 6:12; Col 2:15. This is also the basis of the classic “*Christus Victor*” (Christ the Victor) model of atonement.

⁸ This was certainly true of the Allies in WWII. This is still true today for those who believe they live in a *Christian* country!

⁹ John 18:36; but note – God’s kingdom is certainly *for* this world.

asked by a theology student what he had learned after all his years of study and contemplation. The 76-year-old Swiss theologian said, “Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” It is very easy for us to trivialise these words and so *domesticate* or *tame* Jesus. “Jesus loves me” becomes “Jesus accepts me and makes no great demands on me,” or, “Jesus loves me just as I am.” We say to ourselves, “Of course we’re not perfect, but who is? We’re basically okay and when all is said and done, we’re *good* people.” In light of this image of Jesus, prayer tends to focus on an ‘acceptance of what is’¹⁰ and downplays the need for repentance, change, or turning around, or – indeed – for social or political activism.

These four images of Jesus are not intended as caricatures, nor as a complete list, but to prompt us to respond to the question Jesus asks, “*Who* do you say that I am?”¹¹ Who Jesus is *to us* shapes *our* understanding of prayer *and* the way we see God’s world. There is both truth *and* distortion to each of those images. Jesus is indeed the second person of the Trinity, but focusing on the *divine* Jesus stresses personal piety or “things above,”¹² and can lead us to abandon this world, to become so “heavenly minded that we’re no earthly good.”¹³ God *did* raise Jesus from the dead, but stressing a *conquering* Jesus results in a triumphalist Christianity that seeks to take it over the world “in Jesus name,” rather than to love and serve¹⁴ our neighbour. An excessively *judgemental* Jesus misunderstands his ministry and God’s purposes in history. Of course, a true picture of Jesus *will* contain an element of judgement because *not* everything is acceptable – abuse being an obvious example. But we must always bear in mind that goal of God *is life*, not death, righting what is wrong, rather than obliteration. “God did *not* send his Son into the world to *condemn* the world, but to *save* the world through him.”¹⁵ And an over-emphasis on an *accepting* Jesus results in an uncritical acceptance of the status quo and this undermines God’s passion for justice. Although God loves us, there *is* a righteous judgment against everything that makes for worldly injustice, and stressing an accepting Jesus can make us too passive.

There is another image, one that is appropriate for us to consider on Transfiguration Sunday, that of a *transforming* Jesus. Jesus does not want to take us *out* of the world, he wants to put us *into* it with different vision.¹⁶ He doesn’t want us to conquer the world, but to befriend it. Jesus certainly doesn’t intend us to gather around a band of people who are convinced the world is “going to hell in the handcart” and help try and push it along! Rather, Jesus calls us to see that the present state of the world is unacceptable, and that it *can be changed*. The transforming Christ calls us to participate in his transformation of creation and this requires *engagement* with the world in the power of the Spirit. God modeled this for us in the incarnation – the Word becoming *flesh* - and, as Lent approaches, we know the cost of that engagement. Frankly, this is not an attractive journey for those who have fairly

¹⁰ Acceptance of ourselves, our circumstances, and the world around us.

¹¹ Mark 8:29; Matt 16:15.

¹² Col 3:2.

¹³ The movement of God in Christ is *towards* the world, *not* away from it; Jesus (and the early church) even suffered for it.

¹⁴ See Luke 22:27. It is not accidental of the faith of the early church quickly made the connection between Christ crucified and Isaiah’s suffering servant. What kind of Lord washes the feet of his disciples (John 13:1-17)? We have to unlearn what it means to “dominate” (Gen 1:26,28) and to equate (absolute) power with sovereignty.

¹⁵ John 3:17. Moreover, the Shepherd does not slaughter the sheep, but lays his life down for the sheep (John 10:11).

¹⁶ See John 15:19; 17:14-6; Rom 12:2.

comfortable lives, but it is what the world needs. Allowing a *transforming* Jesus to become our primary image of him will certainly shape our prayers. Followers of Jesus are certainly not *of* the world but we are most definitely *in* the world, and therefore our prayer is for God-given courage to be *in* the world intentionally and without reserve.

What does this mean in practice? That's a good question and I want to make a start at responding to that today. We might begin with the famous prayer of Reinhold Niebuhr, "Lord, grant us the courage to change what can be changed, the serenity to accept what cannot be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish between them." Without doubt, wisdom is important, but we must *not* be limited by human insight and remember Christ's command to, "Seek *first* God's kingdom and his righteousness,"¹⁷ rather than wisdom. We are *not* saved by knowledge, but by a life of repentance, grace, and love - and wisdom does not guarantee those things. This is not to belittle knowledge or wisdom, rather to discover their God-given place and role. This is where discernment and clear-headed perspective¹⁸ are both important in the Christian life.

Luke tells us Jesus often sought out God in solitude to pray, away from the world and others, in order to seek discernment and discover perspective.¹⁹ Indeed, this seems to be the rationale as they go up the Mount of Transfiguration. If Jesus needed this alone-time with God, we too need to create space and time to distance ourselves from the hectic pace and stress of daily existence. This requires an act of *deliberate disengagement*. We do not go into quiet retreat to impress anybody with a warped sense of holiness - least of all God! We withdraw to pray because we *need* to pray. We have to acquire - or reacquire - a sense of perspective, direction, and purpose because they are always in danger of slipping away into the background, upstaged by the immediacy of the mission or the urgent work at hand. The love and eagerness we have for whatever tasks we do for the cause of Christ must be seasoned by discernment and perspective. We would do well to follow Jesus' example in this regard and learn his habit of strategic disengagement. It is too easy to be too busy to pray. Yet without such contemplation, we can inadvertently contribute to the very confusion we want to arrest. Our activities may be entirely sincere, motivated by God's love, but if we ourselves have lost our way, even our good deeds can add to the mess the world.

But it is important to note the purpose of this deliberate detachment is *not* to escape or insulate us from the world; rather it is to enable new levels of attachment and commitment to the world's life through the acquisition of wisdom that seasons our love and service. Such coming away to pray is a means, *not* an end. This is graphically illustrated in what Jesus and his three disciples discovered at the foot of the mount.²⁰ A man's son has an evil "spirit," although it sounds to us like epilepsy, and the other disciples could not heal him. Jesus quickly re-engages with his kingdom business and heals the boy, to the amazement of all concerned. In this way we see the *transforming Christ modelling prayer as critical disengagement for consecrated worldliness!* Prayer is our means of daily asking for courage.

¹⁷ Matt 6:33.

¹⁸ "Perspective" implies a sense of *direction*, a goal - both locally and appreciating God's overall narrative to history.

¹⁹ See Luke 5:16; 6:12; Mark 1:35-38; 6:30-31; Matt 6:6.

²⁰ Luke 9:37-43.

It is a ceaseless dialogue by which means we are enabled to both *find* our way and be empowered *on* the way, by the Spirit's help.²¹

I mentioned at the beginning that Christians often end prayers using the words, "through Jesus Christ our Lord," or, "in Jesus name." What do these phrases mean? What they are *not* are magical incantations or formulae that guarantee the prayer will be answered in the way we want! Nevertheless, they are powerful expressions. Jesus the Messiah *transformed* the way we worship God. No longer do we have to offer sacrifices at the Temple through a priest and by such means approach a holy God. The early church radically adapted their Jewish traditions and interpreted the death and resurrection of Jesus as the *end* of sacrifice.²² They also saw the risen and living Jesus as the Great High Priest *through* whom all have access to God; he is our *mediator* or *intercessor* to God.²³ That's why we end our prayerful submissions with, "*through* Jesus Christ our Lord."

Praying "in Jesus name" speaks to the *authority* associated with a person's name. In a similar way, politicians, the police and people in the judicial system can only act in accordance with the authority given to them by means of their office. The *transforming* Jesus delegated *his* authority to his followers,²⁴ including you and me, and therefore saying "in Jesus name" means this prayer or action is "on *his* behalf" or "by *his* authority."²⁵ It is claiming that, as one of Christ's ambassadors, I believe this specific prayer or action to be consistent with what Jesus himself would say or do in this situation. Now that is a bold claim for anyone to add at the end of a prayer! This is another reason why discernment and perspective are important, because that time away in prayer and study gives confidence as to what prayers and actions are truly coherent with what Jesus would do in the situations we face when we come down that mountain and re-enter the fray.

In summary, when Peter, John and James came down the Mount of Transfiguration they were wondering, "Who exactly is it we are following?" Our response to that question - our overriding image of Jesus - shapes *our* understanding of both prayer *and* the way we see God's world. A *transforming* Jesus is a good image and I invite you to explore it further. He transformed worship rituals, including our use the words, "through Jesus Christ our Lord," or, "in Jesus name" at the end of our prayers. Going forward, let's be more conscious of what those words mean and, hence, more deliberative in how and when we use them. Finally, let us, through prayerful disengagement, rediscover the *transforming* Jesus who, by his Spirit, wants to transform us and, through us, the waiting world. Amen.

²¹ John 1:14.

²² See Heb 9:11-28; Rom 8:34; 1 Tim 2:5. (We must recognise that this is a very *Jewish* image of the meaning of the cross.)

²³ Heb 4:14-5:10; 6:19-20; 10:19-22. There is therefore no *need* for other mediators, e.g., angels or saints or Mary – or priests!

²⁴ Matt 28:18-20; John 20:21-23.

²⁵ See, for example: John 14:13; Acts 2:38; 3:6,16; 4:18,30; 5:40; Col 3:17; James 5:14