

**Sunday 2nd March 2025 - Sermon: Between the Jordan and Gethsemane (Luke 9:28-36) -
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Reflections on this sermon can be shared with Alex at
<https://forms.office.com/e/y3qTy2JA9K?origin=lpLink>.

We are at a turning point within the liturgical calendar. We have reached the end of epiphany, a journey that started with the wise men and ends here with Jesus revealed in glory atop a mountain. And we soon begin to make our journey to Jerusalem, to face the music, as it were; to hear the stories of Easter. Through these weeks, we have learnt more about Jesus, about his ministry here on earth. The healing he brought to many but also the challenges he placed before them. We have explored that sense of being pulled in by Jesus but also recognising that being his disciple is not always an easy place to be. How have you reacted to these epiphanies, these revelations of who Jesus was, what he spoke about, and how he behaved? Have you changed the way you think about him? Has your relationship with him shifted? Well I hope some of those thoughts have made it onto the link I shared earlier, and I invite you to continue to add your thoughts as you listen.

There is a sense that where we have been and where we are going are both reflected in today's reading. For our passage today reminds me of both Jesus' baptism in the Jordan and the Garden of Gethsemane on the night he was arrested. The Transfiguration connects us to an image of the resplendent Christ, while the verses surrounding it prepare us for the events of Easter. As such, we are caught in the middle of all the complexities of Jesus.

If you cast your minds back to his baptism, the heaven opened, the Holy Spirit descended like a dove and a voice was heard announcing, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." As Jesus begins his ministry he is audibly affirmed by God. And in our reading today, Jesus is transformed into a shining figure while a voice comes from a cloud proclaiming, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him." The Gospel, in recording both of these events affirms to us, its reader, that Jesus was something special. This is God's son, beloved, chosen, and worthy of our attention. This is what Epiphany is all about, revealing to us who Jesus was. That as far as we are concerned, he wasn't just a wise man, a good teacher, instead his life, death, and resurrection act as a cornerstone for existence. He provides the direction and the foundation of the cosmos.

Yet, such dramatic confirmation of Jesus' identity seems to, in both his baptism and his transfiguration, precede difficult times. For immediately following his baptism, Jesus heads into the wilderness, where he goes hungry and is tested by the devil. Shortly, but not immediately after, the Transfiguration Jesus "sets his face towards Jerusalem." And what does he talk with Moses and Elijah about? But "the way in which he would soon fulfill God's purpose by dying in Jerusalem." This event marks a turning point in the ministry of Jesus where the focus shifts from life to death. For at this time, Jesus is frequently talking about

his death. "Let these words sink into your ears;" he says, "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands."

In light of this, we could ask ourselves, who are these moments of divine intimacy for? Why does this voice come from the heavens? Are they for our benefit or Jesus? After all, the words at Jesus' baptism are directed towards Jesus himself. "You are my son..." Jesus' transformation and conversation with Moses and Elijah, happens while the three disciples are heavy with sleep, this moment happens, initially, without the disciples. Are they epiphanies or moments of affirmation for Jesus as he carries his unenviable burden.

For the Transfiguration does not simply look back towards the Jordan. It also parallels Gethsemane. For at Gethsemane, on the night Jesus was arrested, we shall once again see Jesus retreating to a quiet place, enter into conversation with the Father, and pray in such distress that his sweat is laced with blood. In anguish, he will once again find his disciples asleep before being betrayed with a kiss.

Did Jesus retreat up that mountain so that we could receive confirmation of his holiness? That his ministry could receive the backing of Moses, Elijah, and the Father? That to all who believe this account he could be upheld as the Son of God? Or was his face turning towards Jerusalem? Was he preparing himself for what was to come? Did he bring his three closest friends, that he might have some company?

We find ourselves in the middle of this story, with a hand on both ends. Reaching back to Jesus' baptism with joy and confirmation. Stretching forward to Jesus' death with fear and trembling.

In which of these voices does Jesus speak about his death? When he tells them, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life." Does his voice remain steady? Does he deliver it so calmly that the disciples have no choice but to dispute it? Or is he shaking their shoulders, begging them to understand that he might have some companions along the road? Is his frustration at their lack of comprehension borne of desperation? Or is it the sound of a teacher with uncooperative pupils?

With all that we have read together this year, how do you imagine Jesus? How have these epiphanies shaped your understanding of him? How do you see him at this moment? Is he charging undaunted into the valley of death? Is he crafting a movement, including moments of revelation for the benefit of his disciples, past and present? Or is he in need of people to hold him as he faces his death? Does its approach loom over his every waking moment, making him easily tired? Does he draw away to quiet places with his closest friends that he might find the strength to take another step?

These are important questions, because our pictures of Jesus shape what we expect of God and of ourselves. For Jesus shows us both what God is like and also shows us what it means to be human. Does his face shine so that we may believe that he has mastered every challenge and disciplined every emotion. Or is it a gift, bestowed precisely when his skin is turning ashen, when his emotions begin to pick him apart? Does God face this world with bravery, stepping into it undaunted? Or does he weep, laid bare by the troubles of this place?

Well, we are treated to this story of the Transfiguration because it reminds us who Jesus is. That whatever happens in Jerusalem, he is Christ Triumphant. Yet precisely because of what happens in Jerusalem, we can also see that he is the defeated Jesus. That these two disparate presentations of Jesus nonetheless reflect the complexities of Immanuel, God with us. To understand Jesus, like the transfiguration we must weave together Jordan and Gethsemane. To attempt to unravel him leads us to misunderstand him. For he stands before us, as Jesus Christ, born to Mary, baptised by John, saviour and agitator, subject to death and yet resurrected to life. I don't know the exact tone Jesus used to speak these words we have laid out in the Gospel. I don't know how his death weighed upon him and shaped his behaviour. Yet, I know that he must have been brave to set his face towards Jerusalem, but also that bravery requires fear. So, I pray that as this season ends, we will never stop receiving epiphanies, revelations about the nature and character of God. For by these means, we walk his way, in both bravery and fear; in assurance and in doubt. So, I pray that Jesus may be lifted from these pages and make himself known to us all.

Amen.