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SERMONS FOR THE CHRISTIAN YEAR

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6th February: Last Sunday after Epiphany:
the Transfiguration of the Lord

WALKING IN THE LIGHT

By *Revd Kerr Spiers*
Glasgow

Exodus 24:12-18; Psalm 2 or Psalm 99; 2 Peter 1:16-21; Matthew 17:1-9

This may be a cold, even dark, February morning but our theme this morning is the opposite of all that. Light. Radiance. Transfiguration. A special light. The light that transfigured Jesus Christ in a radiance that never was on land or sea.

The story of what happened on the mount is full of drama. There is the line-up of characters: the disciples, Peter, James and John; then Moses and Elijah, chosen out of all the heroes of the Old Testament. But these were the human bit players in this unique manifestation of the glory that was to belong to the central figure. For the story is the dramatic portrayal of the mysterious uniqueness of Jesus Christ. The light that lit up the persons of the two men of Sinai and Carmel was the result of being close to Jesus – a reflection of the radiance that focused on him and was reflected from him. Take Jesus away and you would be left with two men trying to find their way in clouds of darkness. The transfiguration rivets our attention for this radiance had been given to none other and bids us find a way to our own transfiguration experience: that is to say to bring us into a contemplation of the mysterious uniqueness to which the Gospels bear their witness.

How may we find our own transfiguration experience in which we are left with the sense that we have looked upon a unique glory? In the Gospel story it says of the disciples: 'When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.' There was nothing between them and the Lord. The way to the view of his splendour was not obstructed. It was the way of direct access. Now there are mystical experiences

that have been part of the Christian tradition that belong to the spiritual experience of a few. Samuel Rutherford, Scottish Covenanter, imprisoned for his faith writes to a friend: 'Jesus Christ came into my cell last night and every stone shone like a ruby'. That kind of experience might today engage the interest of the psychiatric community though they would find Rutherford holding implacably to his faith that he had been visited by the presence of the Lord – and it was luminous with splendour. But of course that does not belong to the normality of the Christian faith and life. Where is our unimpeded way to the vision of the splendour of Christ wherein we see no one except Jesus?

I am suggesting now that that way is most likely to be the way of the open Gospels in which the life of Jesus is narrated by those who stood near to the event. The Lord stands again transfigured in my mind and heart and imagination if I follow the Christ of Galilee or it might be the Christ of Jerusalem mediated directly in the narratives of Matthew, Mark, Luke or John. I know there are critical questions thrown up by their various versions. I am aware of books about the Gospels and I am certainly grateful for the great fountain of biblical scholarship. But there is a time and a place to put them all aside so that the Gospel story becomes the bridge that leads us to the radiance of Christ. So that if for example I take a batch of stories from the middle Galilean part of the Gospels they become a mosaic of the glory of Christ and I share something of the disciples' experience on their Mount of Transfiguration. And as I reflect upon these parables, miracles and sayings so the luminosity gathers ever more brightly around the person at their centre. And you have a sense of what Lillian Cox meant when she wrote:

No flickering torch, no wavering fire,
But Light, the Life of men.
Whatever clouds may veil the sky
Never is night again.

Not after we have seen the light that is in his words and deeds, so lit up with love, wisdom, authority and power. Here is a sample from the heart of Matthew's Gospel. They are transfiguring experiences for those who hear the Lord's words with a humble heart. Jesus said: 'I praise you Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned and revealed them to little children. Yes Father, for this was your good pleasure ... Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.' Isn't there a gentle spiritual luminosity about these words? Isn't there a shining graciousness about them encouraging us to believe that in the hearing and contemplating of them we have entered an area of gentle light, a mount of spiritual transfiguration? And we will want to stay close to this Master for journeying with Him is truly to walk in the light. And we have a sympathetic feeling for Peter and the other disciples who wanted to stay on the mount and perpetuate the transfiguration for a longer time. He wanted to put up tents to establish a community on the mountain top. It wasn't to be but for all that the occasion was indelibly imprinted on his memory and imagination so that when he later came to write to fellow Christians he was strong in his assertion that the Transfiguration was no fantasy: 'We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eye-witnesses of his majesty. For he received honour and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.'

Our sacred mountain may be the church in which we are worshipping or the home from which we have come. Our transfiguration experience may be known as we quietly contemplate in prayer the words and deeds of the Master so that his shining splendour is something that lights up our hearts and minds and we resolve that:

In that light of life I'll walk
Till travelling days are done.

13th February: Lent 1

'TEMPTATION'

*By Sue Lampitt
Charlecote, Warwick*

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Romans 5:12-19, Matthew 4:1-11

Temptation – a familiar, indeed a seminal word in the Christian vocabulary, but perhaps a little bit of a chameleon. The word links our three passages today, but as it does so, it changes shape.

We are all familiar with

'Lead us not into temptation'

but the sophisticated subtlety of Genesis 2 and 3 paints a many-layered picture of a world where temptation is inherent in life.

This passage pre-dates the book of Job with its 'shatan', its tester, who goes about the earth testing this one and that one to see whose worship is truly disinterested and of course, it predates the New Testament where the shatan has progressed from a neutral servant of God, licensed by God to do what he does, to the New Testament leader-of-the-opposition, trying to undermine God's servants. Here in Genesis the temptation seems to be set up by God himself. God gives his humans just one rule, but as Paul knew all too well, as soon as you have a rule, trouble starts. You have a choice and therefore you have a temptation. The story in Genesis is both wise and deep and fully aware of the theological problems which still stare us in the face.

Why does God's good world not function better?

Why are humans morally different from animals?

What is the relationship between the creator and his most sophisticated animals?

For the Yahwist, the writer of Genesis 2 and 3, the answer has something to do with the knowledge of good and evil and our propensity to fall for the latter.

Animals simply fulfil their natures but humans make choices and our writer knows just what sort of choices we humans are inclined to make, self-serving, self-indulgent, bent on self-aggrandizement, power-hungry. He puts his finger on the fact that a lot of the suffering in the world stems from us humans but he can also see

that nature is 'fallen' so that farming is curiously difficult, working against the odds with weeds, drought and pests and involving back-breaking effort to coax poor soils into yielding anything, whilst the cost to young women of childbirth was clear even to men, banished as they were from the actual birth. Jeremiah uses the screams of a girl in her first child-birth as an illustration of terrible pain, and men must have heard those piercing cries as they walked down the village street and known the cost of each new life.

So point one: life is very harsh in God's world.

Explanation: we forfeited the right to live in Paradise by disobeying God's one commandment and then using our ill-gotten knowledge to pretend to his role, his wisdom, by imagining that we had become the moral arbiters and ignoring his laws, with all the consequences predicted by the prophets. Here succumbing to temptation is seen in mythical terms, it explains why life is so difficult and it defends the goodness of God.

We can recognize much of this scenario, but post-Darwin we cannot postulate a paradisaal origin for humans. Life is, and always has been, lived outside paradise in a messy world of choices.

'Now the serpent was more subtle than any of the other beasts of the field ...' Yes, he argued with great sophistication and Adam and Eve fell for it, yet they needn't have done. They had one rule, God's rule and it was a clear rule; they could have kept to it.

Is it actually possible to live like that in our twenty-first century world, to know God's rule(s) and keep them?

Now fast-forward to the Temptations. Here is another profound story, once again set in its contemporary thought-world and therefore in need of some de-coding.

How could this story of the wilderness experience exist unless Jesus had given some indication of what he had been thinking about?

To anyone familiar with the Old Testament it begins with two code words, 'wilderness' and 'forty' both of which say, 'Pay attention, these events are theologically important'. So we should be looking for understanding and interpretation.

In what way was Jesus being 'tempted'?

To be tempted is to envisage a wrong choice, and this is the crux of the matter, how do we know what the wrong choice is?

'He was tempted in all points like as we are, yet without sin.'

Sin is opposition to the will of God, so we have to discover what that is.

If you have the pressing awareness of your mission as God's anointed and you live at the time of Roman occupation with Judaism perched on a knife-edge, how do you discover what God's will for you is? If with Paul you think that Jesus 'emptied' himself of his divinity, he is a frail human being like us.

Was it to be feeding the hungry?

Was it to be performing death-defying miracles?

Was it to be seizing temporal power?

Or was it to be a message from the unquenched smoking reed which would kindle a fire to glow down two thousand years of history?

How do we *know* what God's will is? The plain fact is that we don't. However, there are some precautions which we can take when we try to find it.

Firstly, we can study form: what has been God's will in the past? What have his prophets advocated? Interesting answers emerge.

Justice and mercy ahead of 'sacrifice', obedience ahead of 'sacrifice', a heart which God can look on with satisfaction and never mind the good looks, a clinging to this faith in the face of all that life can throw at you.

All this is in Jesus' text book, the Old Testament. In addition when we look at Jesus' life we can see a chosen vulnerability, risking his own comfort and popularity by challenging the system which delivered injustice and poverty from good men with hard hearts. Stated like this, the temptation to live more comfortably is very obvious.

Did Jesus always get it right?

What would that mean? How would we know? We don't know the intricacies of the daily choices he made, we do believe he kept to the will of God and to God's law, interpreted by love. Here and now in our own day and age what we do know is that we have to make daily choices in a world where morality seems endlessly compromised. We cannot tell if we make the right choices, but if we take Jesus as our pattern we can try to make sure that our choices are not vitiated at the source by cowardice, selfishness, and a lack of knowledge of God's moral law.

Paul, in Romans, carefully draws the line down through history from the first Adam, who brought

death, to the second Adam who brought life. C. S. Lewis in his *Narnia Chronicles* calls the children 'sons of Adam and daughters of Eve' reminding us of our heritage. Temptation is endemic for us humans with our physical, animal, evolved nature, but as Christians we are also 'in Christ' and this brings a commitment to a spiritual interpretation of our world too. So we can look to the second Adam, consider the interpretations of life which he regarded as temptations to be rejected and use this to guide our own choices, to be clear about what we should regard as temptation and what seems to be God's will. All that will then remain will be to do it.

As St Augustine said, 'Love God and do as you will.' If only we loved God enough.

20th February: Lent 2

A TRAVELLER'S TALE

By the Revd John Pilkington
Emsworth

Genesis 12:1-4a

'So Abram went, as the Lord had told him . . . Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.'

Many great people owe their greatness to tasks they undertook when they could have been drawing their pension. We were led to victory in the Second World War by a senior citizen: Winston Churchill was sixty-five at the beginning of the war. Nelson Mandela was ten years older, older even than Abraham was reported to have been on his departure from Haran, when, on his release from twenty-seven years of imprisonment with hard labour, he became President of South Africa at seventy-five. Pierre Monteux was eighty-six when he became chief conductor of the London Symphony Orchestra, having accepted the job on condition that he was given a twenty-five year contract. Helena Pozniak was eighty-nine when she sailed across the Atlantic and back; she split the watch with one of her sons, four hours on, four hours off, on the outward voyage, and with her other son on the return voyage.

These and other men and women like them could have been putting their feet up, but they chose not to.

According to the story. Abraham is seventy-five when he hears God calling him to set out on a

journey to a foreign land. How does he hear God's voice? Is there some stirring within him? A realization that there is not much time left? If we thought we would live for ever, we would not get round to doing anything, we would have all the time in the world. At seventy-five Abraham must know that his days are numbered; it is now or never if he is to embark on the greatest venture of his life.

So he leaves Haran with his wife Sarah, his nephew Lot and his family, and their livestock and belongings. Shechem is the first major milestone; here he builds an altar and thanks God for getting him this far. He moves on. Bethel is the next major milestone; again he builds an altar. The time comes when Abraham and Lot part company, because the land cannot sustain both families. Abraham lets the younger man take the more attractive direction, while he sets out for the wilder and less hospitable countryside. Then he builds another altar at Mamre. So he journeys on, by stages. The days become weeks, the weeks become years. When next there is a note of the passing of time, twenty-four years have gone by since he left Haran. All through his travels his ultimate destination is 'the land that I will show you', it is this that defines the purpose of the journey and gives meaning to it.

There are three kinds of walk. There is the walk where you return to the start by the way you have come. There is the circular walk; you do not walk the same path twice but you finish the walk where you began it. And there is the walk which ends at a different place from where it started. This may be a long distance walk, ending two hundred miles from the start. Your ultimate destination defines the whole walk, but there are intermediate destinations on the way. Today your destination is a particular youth hostel. As the day draws on, your ultimate destination remains at the back of your mind but your immediate thoughts are of getting your boots off and of supper and a fire in the grate tonight. When you get there, you value the hospitality of that hostel for the night, you enjoy the meals and the company of other hostellers. Morning comes and you must move on. Yesterday was easy going and the weather was kind, but today you must cross the mountains and the weather forecast is not promising, but you have booked in at the next hostel and you must reach your next destination. So, fortified by a cooked breakfast, you leave. But you have set up a kind of altar in your memory. You may not ever come

this way again, but you won't forget this hostel where you have stayed a night. The people you have met there, or the people with whom you walked part of the way yesterday, may remain in your memory for ever. So you struggle on through the wind and the rain, with memories of last night but your thoughts now on the next night's stop.

The Bible is a book of travellers' tales. People are always on journeys. Abraham dies, and later Moses will resume his journey and lead the people on the long journey across the wilderness to the promised land. He won't reach the end. Of Jesus and his disciples, we read, 'They were on the road, going to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them.' Twice after his death he appears to people on roads. A baptism takes place at a roadside. In later years this new faith will be described as 'The Way'. People journey on this Way from one place to another, from the past and into the future. They meet obstacles, and sometimes they wander off the path. As they journey to their next destination, the final destination is at the back of their minds.

Each of us has our individual journeys to undertake. Like Abraham, we set up altars on the way. Confirmation, or some experience which has meant a great deal, may be one such altar. But we must continue the journey. If we live the life of faith as we did when we were confirmed, or if collectively we live it as our ancestors did hundreds of years ago, this would be as if Abraham had built an altar at Shechem but had never moved on. God is a journeying God, who calls us to journey with him.

27th February: Lent 3

WEARINESS, AND ITS CURE

*By the Revd Peter G. Jarvis
Countess Wear, Exeter*

John 4:5-42

I am spoilt for choice when it comes to preaching on this lengthy Gospel reading. I could concentrate on the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, and on his extraordinary prophecy of the abolition of holy places (v. 21), of a time when the ubiquitous God, who is Spirit, will be worshipped by his true worshippers anywhere and everywhere (v. 23). Or I could concentrate on those fields already

white for harvest, and waiting to be reaped (v. 35); or on the missionary work of the Samaritan women (an unlikely missionary if ever there was one), and the amazing success of her mission, persuading her fellow Samaritans to acknowledge Jesus as Messiah, as the Saviour of the world (v. 42).

But I am haunted by that picture of the human Jesus, wearied with his journey, sitting beside Jacob's well in the scorching heat of the midday sun, thirsty, but unable to get at the water (v. 6).

How do you think of Jesus? Do you think of him as a divine invader, sent down from heaven, having tremendous advantages over ordinary people like us, and able to do all manner of things we cannot do? Do you see him as riding roughshod over the laws of nature whenever it suited his purpose, taking various supernatural short-cuts, and possessing an armoury of secret spiritual weapons? Do you regard him as a wonder-worker, passing through this world, to which he didn't really belong, like a visitor from outer space, and performing outlandish miracles from time to time? Well, that is a picture of Christ which can be legitimately derived from the Gospels, especially John's Gospel. But is it, in part at least, the imposition of a divine Christ on the human Jesus, the historic Jesus?

How do I think of Jesus? I think of him as a human being, accepting and living within human limitations. I believe that Jesus, like us, was made in the image of God; but that Jesus, unlike us, allowed that image to emerge, to develop, to come to fulfilment in his life. We, on the other hand, tend to repress that image, to distort and obscure it, to render it unrecognizable.

The task of an actor, so Hamlet declared, is 'to hold the mirror up to nature' – that is, to be as natural as possible, so that the play and the acting, even if larger than life, may be a recognizable reflection of real life. And the task of Jesus, if I may put it like this, was to hold the mirror up to God, so that the image of God might be reflected, as indeed it was, in his life, his death, and his resurrection. Jesus, a human being, reflects God's nature, reflects God's creative, self-giving, suffering and triumphant love. In seeing the human Jesus, we see the divine God, who inspired his life, who was with him in death, and who raised him from the dead.

Thinking of Jesus as I do, I'm particularly attracted by the human touches in the Gospels. I'm glad that Jesus was moved to tears, weeping over Jerusalem, weeping at the grave of Lazarus. I'm glad that Jesus

was moved to anger, angry at man's inhumanity to man, at pharisaic rigidity and hardness of heart, angry at misrepresentations of God, depicting him as an irrational tyrant, asking the impossible, and then punishing people for not achieving it. I'm glad that Jesus was sometimes weary, exhausted, tired out, as when he fell asleep in the stern of the boat and even a tempest failed to awaken him, as when he said to his disciples, 'Come away by yourselves to a lonely place, and rest a while.' The disciples needed a rest, and so did Jesus, though on that occasion they didn't get it. Thinking of Jesus as I do, I'm glad he was wearied with his journey, his pilgrimage, as we sometimes are.

Jesus and his disciples had been travelling on foot. Jesus was hot, dusty, hungry, thirsty. His disciples had gone off to buy food, and he sat alone by the well, the sun beating down on him. He was thirsty, but couldn't get water from the well, having no bucket. Such was the situation. But St John is probably hinting at something deeper than physical thirst, at a thirst for God, the source of spiritual refreshment and strength. He may also be hinting that the weariness of Jesus was something more than physical weariness. Jesus, like Blake's sunflower, was weary of time and longing for eternity.

The pilgrim Jesus, on his difficult journey through life, was feeling the strain. He had come from God, as we all do; he was going to God, as we all are; and God was with him and within him every step of the way, which is also true of us. But he was weary, in body and in spirit, weary of the world, of life, of time, as we sometimes are.

A woman came to the well, a Samaritan woman with a terrible track-record. She had worked her way through five husbands, and was now living with someone who wasn't her husband. No respectable person would have anything to do with her. To her surprise a Jewish man was sitting by the well. She expected him to ignore her completely, to pretend she didn't exist. To her even greater surprise, he actually spoke to her. More than that, he asked her to do him a favour: 'Give me a drink.' And so the

fascinating conversation began, so fascinating that Jesus may never have got his drink, and certainly lost all sense of weariness and hunger, refusing food when his disciples returned. He was intent on helping the woman to untangle her tangled life.

This should be the pattern for the pilgrim Church. Through the centuries the Church has gained pomp, authority, prestige, power, and has often misused these things. The Church has sought to control people's minds and consciences, has been guilty of oppression and cruelty, putting people in intellectual bondage instead of setting them free. The Church has forgotten her role as servant of mankind, as chief exponent in the world of God's creative, self-giving, suffering and triumphant love. And so the pilgrim Church has grown weary. But hidden at the heart of the Church is the Spirit of Jesus, and his Spirit, however weighed down by man-made encumbrances, keeps breaking out afresh, keeps rising from the dead, irrepressible, invincible, indestructible. Which is why I still have faith in the Church, despite its failings. It is the Church of God, the Body of Christ, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, and the gates of hell, the powers of death, the tides of time, shall not prevail against it. The pilgrim Church, weary and heavy-laden, finds new strength, as Jesus did, in helping others, serving others, loving others.

And what about ourselves? As we grow older we tend to be wearied with our journey, giving way to tiredness, frustration, even despair. Some words of St Paul provide a suitable antidote: 'Let us not grow weary in well-doing, for in due season we shall reap, if we do not lose heart.' We need, not just the example of Jesus before us, but the Spirit of Jesus within us. As individual Christians we should show in our lives something of God's creative, self-giving, suffering and triumphant love. It was fully revealed in Jesus, and is partly revealed in the Church. May it also be revealed in your life and in mine.

Such love shall ever make me glad,
Strong in thy strength to work or rest,
Until I see thee face to face,
And in thy light am fully blessed.

Coming next month ...

Donald Bretherton offers a re-interpretation of Exodus 22:18, asking if it is indeed an invitation to murder witches. And in an article introduced by John Riches, John Vincent explores the practice of disciples, as 'worked out' in our modern context. The Book of the Month is Graham Stanton's *Jesus and Gospel*, reviewed by Paul Foster.