**Prayer and the unexpected. Sunday March 13 2022 Luke 9: 28 – 36**

What happens when we pray? What do we expect to happen when we pray? Does our expectation need to be high in order to see a response?

We pray in many contexts. In times of exuberance or despair, shock, or thankfulness, and frequently just in ordinary times. We speak of prayer as a spiritual discipline, yet it is also so much more than a discipline, it Is primarily an expression of relationship, it involves speech, but it is not a one-way communication, it is a dialogue, it involves listening.

The account of the Transfiguration which we heard this morning is set in the context of prayer. Jesus has gone with three of his disciples up a mountain to pray. Mountains were associated with places to retreat and encounter God.

This chapter begins with Jesus commissioning the twelve and them entering into ministry, in his authority. It is followed by Herod questioning who Jesus is, and then by Jesus asking the disciples who the people think he is. In the midst of these dialogues, we have Jesus feeding the 5,000 and predicting his sufferings and death. Then we encounter todays’ reading. The chapter continues with more demonstrations of Jesus power, some people rejecting him and others confused about what true discipleship entails. Meanwhile Jesus continues to affirm that the path ahead for him is one of suffering and betrayal. We see people grappling with, questioning, or encountering Jesus and reflecting on who this Jesus really is. We also see Jesus affirming his disciples and the ministry they will share in, whilst sharing more about his destiny. This was a time for shaking and sifting. The disciples were being challenged to accept who Jesus was and that his destiny was vastly different to that which they were likely to be expecting. This was indeed a time for prayer.

Prayer often enables us to gain insight into what we are facing. The ‘sights’ that confront these disciples become one of the foundations of their insights into who Jesus really is. We read that “the appearance of Jesus face changed and his clothes became dazzling white”[[1]](#footnote-1) “In OT and Jewish tradition, one’s countenance is a mirror of one’s heart and a manifestation of one’s relationship with God.”[[2]](#footnote-2)“Jesus’ appearance confirmed his presence with God.”[[3]](#footnote-3) We read that there was a dazzling brightness about his clothing. The disciples viewed this experience as an encounter with Jesus’ glory.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The disciples were there for a reason. They were invited to see for themselves something of Jesus glory and that this glory was a continuation of the ministry of those who had gone before like Moses and Elijah, and yet Jesus’ ministry was also going to surpass anything that had happened previously. It was as though in this experience Jesus’ inner being was made transparent to his followers.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The experience moves on from what they see, to what they hear and experience together. *“[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;[[i](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke%209&version=NRSV" \l "fen-NRSV-25329i" \o "See footnote i)] listen to him!”[[6]](#footnote-6)* These words should take them back to their Scriptures, to the Psalms and Isaiah which emphasise that God has chosen this One, and the Isaiah passage also has God affirming that he is “his Servant” and the One “in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.” The experience of being encompassed by this cloud would also be seen as an established sign of the Presence of God.[[7]](#footnote-7) Three times in two verses the presence of the cloud is mentioned, it had a powerful impact upon these disciples, they experienced something of the power and radiance of God’s presence.[[8]](#footnote-8) They were terrified. On this occasion the voice of God is directed to them, instructing them, “This is my Son, my Chosen;[[i](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke%209&version=NRSV" \l "fen-NRSV-25329i" \o "See footnote i)] listen to him!”[[9]](#footnote-9) The words vindicate all that Jesus has and will say, “God himself has unveiled and sanctioned Jesus’ status and mission.”[[10]](#footnote-10) “The God who could rescue the Son from suffering confirms for Jesus the way of the cross.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Jesus is now the authorised interpreter of the law and the prophets.[[12]](#footnote-12) The words also call the disciples even in the context of Jesus predicted sufferings and death to hear him and believe.

The disciples were not the most eager, receptive audience one could imagine. Weighed down by sleep, barely awake they appear to have had an awareness of the scene unfolding before them. Their sleeping could be contrasted with Jesus repeated calls for them to be watchful and prayerful. [[13]](#footnote-13) The disciples do not speak about their experience, it is just the beginning of their comprehension, they don’t really understand. They are not ready to speak about it and the other disciples and the broader community would not have been ready to hear it either. It will be filled out much later through the resurrection and ascension of Jesus and the gift of God’s Spirit for them.

Prayer sits strongly as the backdrop to this encounter. Prayer preceded Jesus’ question to his disciples regarding who people were saying that Jesus was. It was while Jesus was praying that he was transfigured. He had gone there to pray. At his baptism, it was whilst he was praying that “the heavens were opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form as a dove”[[14]](#footnote-14), then the voice from heaven affirmed “you are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased”[[15]](#footnote-15) Prayer was at the heart of Jesus life and ministry.[[16]](#footnote-16) The passage reinforces the power of prayer to enable us to perceive the presence of God.[[17]](#footnote-17)

For Jesus the transfiguration confirmed who he was in the hearing of his followers and announced that the path before him was the correct path and therefore his followers should listen to him. For the apostles this also showed that Jesus was the Son of God. “This God also tells the disciples, who will soon face conditions that seem to derail if not bring to an end their hope in Jesus, that those very painful conditions do not lie *across* the way but *on* the way to the completion of God’s purpose.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Suffering and death will also bring liberation and healing.[[19]](#footnote-19)

We may like to penetrate the mystery of this experience of Jesus transfiguration, but we won’t find a simple explanation that fully honours the story. The response of standing in awe, wonder and worship at this mystery and this demonstration of God’s power is a most appropriate response.

In our own lives we may have had experiences which we found difficult to explain through which we experienced God’s presence. Prayerfully sitting with these experiences with an openness to God to show us how to respond is a very appropriate response. We see that prayer sits as a backdrop in this story. It can be easy though for us to get into habits in prayer that hinder a sense of expectation or openness to the surprising ways in which God may communicate with us. I recall when I sensed my call to ordained ministry I had been praying immediately before this happened, yet it still took me quite a while to put together that this indeed may be God’s response to my prayers. At any point in life, “we may discover a purpose or calling that casts a radiant light over the rest of our lives.”[[20]](#footnote-20)

1. Luke 9:29 b NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke,* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1997) 380 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. R. Alan Culpepper, “The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections” in Leander E. Keck et al. (Ed.) *The New Interpreters Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes,* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1995) 206 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Luke 9:32b NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Green, *The Gospel of Luke,* 380 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Luke 9:34b-25 - Based on Psalm 2:7b and Isaiah 42:1 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Exodus 20: 16-25; 24:15-16 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Green, *The Gospel of Luke,* 383-84 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Luke 9:35b NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Green, *The Gospel of Luke,* 384 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Fred Craddock, *The Gospel of Luke,* (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1990) 135 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Green, *The Gospel of Luke,* 384 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Luke 21:36; 22:46 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Luke 3:21b-22a NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Luke 3:22b NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Luke 5:16; 6:12; 9:18; 22:41 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Culpepper, “The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections” 205 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Fred Craddock, *The Gospel of Luke,* (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1990) 135 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Green, *The Gospel of Luke,* 379 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Culpepper, “The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections” 207 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)