

## MINISTRY RESOURCES FOR SUNDAY 14 FEBRUARY 2021

This service was prepared for the Tuesday congregation at St Stephen's, and anticipates Transfiguration Sunday on 14<sup>th</sup>. Subsequently, I was asked to preach at Strathfield again, so will actually be there for Transfiguration Sunday. And Wednesday coming is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent!

### 1 Prayers of Adoration and Confession

**Psalm 147 1:11, 20c**

*(From Psalm 50:1-6)*

*The mighty one, God the LORD,  
speaks and summons the earth  
from the rising of the sun to its setting.*

*Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty,  
God shines forth.*

*Our God comes and does not keep silence,  
before him is a devouring fire,  
and a mighty tempest all around him.*

*He calls to the heavens above  
and to the earth, that he may judge his people:*

*“Gather to me my faithful ones,  
who made a covenant with me by sacrifice!”*

*The heavens declare his righteousness,  
for God himself is judge.*

And yet, our God, you are not only judge, but you are Saviour.

You have chosen to express your greatness and might,  
not as overlord and tyrant,

but as merciful reconciler, forgiving parent, gracious redeemer.

Your light shines into the darkness of sin as your Son, Jesus Christ,  
who alone is our Lord.

We praise you and worship you,  
as the mighty one whose strength is our shield and our redemption.

So we confess before you and each other  
that we have been careless of, and blind to, your great gift of salvation.

We have allowed the lures of this world –  
its temptations, its illusory promises and its ephemeral pleasures –  
to capture our attention and divert our devotion.

We have become slaves to worldly rewards, and neglected eternal realities.

We have allowed a veil to come between us and your truth,  
between our gaze and the light that has come into the world.

Forgive us, we pray.

Chasten us, discipline us and strengthen us that we might do better in the future,  
and bless us with your grace and pardon.

For we ask it in the blessed name of Jesus.

Amen

2 **Declaration of Forgiveness**

God did not send his Son into the world to judge the world,  
but to forgive the world.

He assures us that, if we confess our sins,  
he is faithful and kind,  
and will forgive us our wrongdoing.

So the sure promise of God is that our sins are forgiven.

Thanks be to God.

3 **Bible Readings –**

Mark 9:2-9

II Corinthians 4:1-6

4 **Sermon:** See below

5 **Prayers of the People and Lord's Prayer**

God our Father,

You call us to love others,

and to act to make our communities and our world a better place.

So we come before you today to pray for our own efforts,

and for the efforts of others, to improve the lot of our fellow human beings.

We ask first that you will grant us eyes to see where help is needed.

Forbid that our busyness or our prejudices or our willing blindness

should close our minds to the many needs that are all around us.

And grant us hearts that are not easily hardened,

grace that does not look to cast blame on those who are in need,

and generosity with our time, our talents and our treasure.

We pray for the many, many bodies that work to assist those in need –

for government departments, registered charities, community organisations.

May their motives always remain pure and generous,

and their integrity ironclad;

and may their work be blessed.

We pray for individuals and small groups who have seen a need

and sought to respond to it;

may the same be true for them.

We pray for the larger charities which have been particularly taxed

over the past twelve months of economic dislocation –

for Uniting and the Wesley Mission, for Anglicare, for the Smith Family,

for St Vincent de Paul and Catholic Welfare,

for Food Bank and Oz Harvest.

There are too many to name, Father,

and lack of size and visibility of so many smaller endeavours

is no indicator of lack of efficacy or of unimportance.

So we pray for them all, at the same time praying

that those who criminally seek to exploit the generosity of the donating public

for their own selfish gain will be brought to justice,

and held accountable for the huge betrayal of trust

for which they are responsible.

May each of *us* play our part as donors, as advocates, and as volunteers,

that we may contribute to fulfilling your calling to us,

that your people be a blessing to the world.

Our father in heaven,  
Hallowed be your name.  
Your kingdom come;  
Your will be done  
on earth as in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread,  
and forgive us our sins  
as we forgive those who sin against us.  
Save us from the time of trial  
and deliver us from evil,  
for the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,  
now and forever.  
Amen

**5 Blessing and Dismissal**

*... it is God .... who has shone in our hearts  
to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God  
in the face of Jesus Christ.*

With that sure knowledge in your heart,  
and that glorious light in your sight,  
the “god of this world” has no power over you.  
So go to be the people of God in the worlds you occupy,  
and seek to be a blessing to all whom you encounter.  
The grace of the Lord, Jesus Christ,  
the love of God,  
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,  
be with you and remain with you always.  
Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.  
Amen

## SERMON

Looking back after many years, the writer of John's gospel could see it very clearly. The coming of Jesus had been the coming into the world of a very special light – “the light of all people”; “the true light that enlightens everyone”. It was the light that the darkness could not overcome.

This Sunday is Transfiguration Sunday, and you'll have noticed that one of our readings is Mark's account of that mysterious event. The transfiguration is such a complex, such a challenging, such an enigmatic event that it has seen countless different commentaries and interpretations. As a story, it's simple enough. Jesus, accompanied only by his “inner circle” of Peter, James and John, ascends a high mountain. There he is bathed in a dazzling light – “transfigured” is the word we use – while the figures of Moses and Elijah appear with him in conversation. In the Old Testament particularly, mountains are often associated with the presence of God. In this New Testament account of the transfiguration, God is indeed present, and the voice of God speaks: “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him.”

Whatever the other symbols means, and whatever other layers of meaning we can discern in the account of the transfiguration – and it is a very rich passage indeed! – what is very clear is that the dazzling light is central to the whole account. In this brief moment, Peter, John and James literally *see* the light that had come into the world. They *see* the “true light” that John's gospel was later to speak of. It was the same light that *was* at the Creation. It is the same light that once shone from Moses' face, after he had had an encounter with God – but Moses merely *reflected* the radiance of God, and that radiance gradually faded from Moses' aura. The radiance that transfigures Jesus *belongs* to Jesus, *emanates from* Jesus. The light that has come into the world is momentarily made crystal clear to the three watching disciples: that light *is* Jesus Christ, and the voice of God identifies Jesus and endorses Jesus: “Listen to him.”

It really matters not a jot whether we take this story as literal truth, or as a metaphor for an extraordinary revelation granted to these three disciples. The nature of their experience is consistent with other such experiences.

Think, for example, of the dramatic event which turned around the life of Saul, the persecutor of the Church, on the road to Damascus. It was that same blinding light that flashed around him, throwing him to the ground and literally (but temporarily) blinding him. “I am Jesus,” came the voice. Paul had been granted the same privilege of revelation – he had seen the light that had come into the world, and had come to know that it was Jesus Christ.

It is about that same light that Paul writes in our second passage, taken from the so-called “second” letter to the church in Corinth. In fact our “II Corinthians” was at least the fourth letter Paul had written to this troublesome and troubling congregation, though two of them are now lost. In II Corinthians, Paul is advising the people of Corinth that he will be visiting them soon, to try to sort out some of the troubles that had arisen on a previous, truncated, visit, and which he'd tried to deal with in one of the lost letters. Since we only have Paul's responses to the issues, it's hard to be sure of exactly what was going on among the Christians in Corinth, but it's clear that a good deal of it involved personal attacks on Paul himself. His detractors appear to have made a number of criticisms about him, on the genuineness of his apostleship, and on the authenticity of his gospel. We pick up hints of some of these criticisms in our passage. But Paul does not lose heart, because, he writes, he has been commissioned by God's mercy to proclaim his gospel. In II Corinthians, he carefully sets about dealing with the criticisms that have been levelled at him in the Corinthian church.

It would seem that some of his critics had accused him of developing something of a cult of

personality. In I Corinthians, we have already learnt that the Corinthians church had developed followings around individuals – “one says, ‘I belong to Paul,’ and another, ‘I belong to Apollos.’” Paul had not wanted that then, and now writes that the only way he “commends” *himself* is by an open statement of the truth, in the full sight of God. What he commends is not himself at all, but the gospel of Jesus Christ. It’s always been about Jesus, never about Paul.

But it seems that one of the other criticisms was that his gospel had not been effective – that it remained “veiled” to some in the Corinthian church. If it really were the truth, then *why* were some people unable to see it? It’s in that context that Paul embraces the imagery of light that we’ve been talking about.

*And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God..... For it is the God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.*

It’s worth unpacking that short but very complex passage, because its importance was not solely for the Corinthian Christians. No less do we need to heed the warning inherent in these words.

To Paul, the gospel he proclaims is the light that has come into the world, because it *is* the gospel of Jesus Christ. If some folk can’t see that light, then it’s not about the light – it’s about them. So Paul connects a number of light images in his attempt to meet the challenge of his critics in Corinth. We go back to the creation hymn, when the light appeared and shone into the darkness of the void. At that point light becomes an emblem of God, a kind of signature of God’s presence, and of the mighty force that had wrought the creation into being. That glory of God, says Paul, is in the face of Jesus Christ, “who is the image of God”. The light shines *upon*, and is *in*, the face of Jesus, revealing who Jesus is. Jesus *is*, in fact, the light that shines in the darkness.

When Paul wrote that phrase, “the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ,” he almost certainly had in mind his own blinding experience on the Damascus road. He may well also have had in mind the event of the transfiguration – although Mark’s gospel had not yet been written. And in all his light imagery, Paul may also have had in mind the ideas that the writer of John later wrote in his prologue – that Christ was the light that came into the world, and which the darkness could never overcome. While neither of those passages had been written down in its present form when Paul was writing to the Corinthians, the ideas were clearly part of the tradition that was being preserved about Jesus. And they are very much in the thinking that Paul reveals in his writing here.

But the other light image that Paul seems to have in mind is the way in which Moses’ face had had to be veiled so the glory of God that temporarily radiated from him would not blind the Israelites. So in Paul’s words to the Corinthians, his *gospel* is “veiled” to some to some of them. But there’s a difference. The veil which Moses’ wore was a benign one; it was to protect the Israelites, because the radiance of God that Moses reflected made them fearful. The veil that conceals the radiance of the gospel that Paul proclaims is not like that.

*[The gospel], Paul writes, is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ.....*

The veil that prevents some of the Corinthians seeing Paul’s gospel is not anything to do with what Paul has preached; they haven’t been blinded by the light – because they can’t *see* the light; they have been “blinded by “the god of this world”. The unbelievers in Corinth are not able to see the light because they are beholden to “the god of this world”. It’s here that our passage takes on great

relevance for all of us, for Christians of every time and place. What *was* the “god of this world” to the unbelievers in Corinth? We can only speculate, although there are plenty of hints in Paul’s two letters to that church. But we’re very aware of what “the god of this world” is in our own time. Or, in fact, the *many gods* of this world. – as no doubt there were in Corinth too.

For us who live in an affluent and comfortable society in a Western nation, the allures of the world we live in are pervasive and plentiful. How many of us are focused on the accumulation of wealth and possessions? For how many of us is our career the centre of all our thinking? Or is it power and self-importance and self-aggrandisement? Perhaps it’s something which we may think of as altogether more innocent – our family, or our home, or our hobby, or our sport, or our holidays. Or simply our deep desire for security and safety. Our material world places such stock on all these things. They are how we measure our success, our self-worth, our value to our society. None of them is, in itself, an inherently bad thing, but when *we* elevate them to something that dominates our lives, we make of them “gods of this world”. And Paul makes clear what we already, deep down know – that they blind us to the light of Jesus Christ.

Jesus himself commented on this very thing, when he said,

*... where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

And there was much truth in his words when he warned,

*It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.*

We don’t know how Paul’s words were received in Corinth. They were pretty damning for some of Paul’s critics in the congregation – but while he certainly needed to defend himself, it was far from Paul’s intention to damn anyone. He wanted all to be able to see, with the clarity that had been granted to him, that Christ was the true light that had come into the world.

In the same way, if *we* are found out by Paul’s stern warning about the “god of this world”, we should not take it as damning but as warning – indeed as an invitation. Because the gods of this world dwell on the plain of our everyday existence. They invade our lives in all our busyness and worldliness. Paul’s warning is inviting us to join Peter, John and James on the mountaintop; to join Paul himself on the road to Damascus; to understand the cosmic truth that John enshrined in the prologue to his gospel. We are being invited to glimpse the Transfiguration of Christ for ourselves. To accept that invitation, we need do no more than push the false gods of this world aside, and to open our eyes to the splendour that shines into the darkness, bringing light and truth and salvation.

Amen