

Father God, help us focus upon the light of Jesus through the power of your illuminating Spirit. Amen.

- One Easter holidays when I was 19, I went walking in the Lake District with some friends for a few days. This was the first time I had ever been to the Lake District, and it was also apparently the first week of good weather they'd had since the previous October. We climbed glorious snow covered fells in bright sunshine and I was blown away by the whole experience. I can still feel the cold April air on my cheeks when I think about it. I can still see the shining reflection of the snow all around as we laboured up the somewhat icy paths, red faced and puffing, with rucksacks on our backs and youth hostel breakfasts in our stomachs. It made a deep impression on me and probably cemented my love of walking which has lasted for the next 40 years.
- Of course climbing up a high mountain or even a smallish hill opens up your horizons and gives you vision. It usually makes you glad to be alive. It often makes you feel truly alive, invigorating the senses and delighting the soul. But what you see and the impression it makes upon you depends on where you are.
- When Jesus climbed up a high mountain he took his three closest friends with him, Peter, James and John, but no one else. Why was this? Did he know something special was going to happen and was preparing for it? Did he just need a day off to recover during the heavy business of saving the world? Was he wondering about the future and whether he could manage it? After all he's just told his disciples, 6 days earlier, that his mission was to suffer, be rejected, and die on a cross. If you know that is your future it would take some getting used to! We can only guess at the motives, but they made it to the top of the high mountain and were apparently immediately caught up in a Kingdom of God experience.
- There he was, *'his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them.'* Do you think that's another way of saying that Jesus felt truly alive? More than alive? I wonder what it must have felt like?
- He was surrounded by two famous ancestors, Moses and Elijah, Jews for whom the bible reports that no one knows where they are buried. For Jesus all this must surely have been a reassurance pointing to the hope of resurrection after suffering and death. A reassurance and a closeness between earth and heaven. A reassurance that the difficult path he was being asked to walk was indeed the right one. He was indeed being faithful to his Father in heaven. The view for Jesus on top of the mountain must have been glorious even if he was in the middle of a cloud! He was bathed in the love and power and the closeness of the Kingdom of God.
- I am reminded of another high mountain which Jesus was taken to, shortly after he was baptized, when he went off into the wilderness. In Matthew we read, *'the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour.'* The view from this mountain might have been glorious in a very different way. There is little of heaven about it. It's more to do with power and ambition and desire. *'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.'* said the wheedling voice at the back of his head.
- Jesus' faithfulness to his Father ensured he saw straight through the empty promises of the devil and kept the closeness to heaven as *'suddenly angels came and waited on him.'* It was this faithfulness that made the Father proclaim from the cloud, *'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!'*
- So what you see from the top of your high mountain depends on your starting point, where you are.
- For the disciples, Peter, James and John, it was all too much. The view was frightening. The precipice steep and the drop tremendous. *'Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' 6 He did not know what to say, for they were terrified.'* Peter wanted to hold on to the moment even so, trying to build shelter for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. And what is quite clear, because the account appears in three Gospels, is that unsurprisingly the view made a deep lifelong impression on the disciples. They never forgot it even though it only made sense after the resurrection.
 - For them the light as firmly fixed on Jesus, with *'his clothes ... dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them.'* The view was not of the surrounding countryside, or even really of Moses and Elijah. The focus was firmly on Jesus, corroborated once again by the voice of his Father, *'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!'*

- The transfiguration only really makes sense when it is seen against a backdrop of suffering, death and ultimately resurrection. Without that it is just a nice day out and a good story. With it, it is a divine assurance that Jesus is the Son of God, The Messiah who was sent to free us from the human condition of selfishness and self-obsession. A foretaste of the cross where the focus is once again clearly on Jesus instead of ourselves, and a foretaste of the resurrection where the glorious light of early morning shining out of the empty tomb is surely the same light that dazzled Jesus' disciples on top of the mountain.
- Jesus died to enable God to close the gap between earth and heaven, to show us just what a sacrifice he was prepared to make to prove his love to us. Without it we would never have known. Without it, sin would be unchallenged. With it we can keep the light firmly on Jesus instead of ourselves and respond as we hear the voice of God, *'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!'* Jesus rose again in order to prove that God has the power and the desire to bring all this about. This is all the unstated backdrop at the top of the mountain.
- The terrible pity is that so many people do not see it. As St Paul says in the reading from 2 Corinthians, *'In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers*
- I heard a celebrated Christian evangelist last week who said that he felt that the pandemic was opening people's hearts to God because they were realizing they did not have the answers themselves. For the first time, perhaps, they were understanding that human beings are not in control. I don't know whether you think that is true, but I have to say it is not my experience, which has been much more of people becoming fixated on life 'getting back to some sort of normality'.
- The problem is that 'normality' that so many people are hankering for seems to imply take away coffees in disposable cups, next day delivery where you don't ask too many questions about how far your purchase has travelled or the conditions in which it was made, and foreign holidays and long queues at Gatwick. None of which does much justice to God's creation or I suspect is sustainable for more than a few decades more.
- Their eyes are blinded by the gods of this world *'to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.'* And the chief god of them all is themselves.
- I can think of another steep hill I scaled, this time in the Ardèche, in France, I was at the top and enjoying the view except for the fact that a large electricity pylon neatly bisected it. However much I tried to focus on the beauty of the landscape, I couldn't get the pylons tramping across the countryside out of my mind.
- I wonder if the role of the Church is to remember the pylons that disturb the view. If we get too comfortable in the world we cease to notice the elements of injustice and disharmony with creation that pervade so many areas of our daily life. We don't notice the pylons of sin and just hanker after that pretty view.
 - That's keeping the cross out of view in the transfiguration.
- In that case, when the view is disturbed, whether by pandemic or planning applications for 3 000 new houses, all we want is to get our nice view back without having to challenge ourselves much to see if it is really an accurate view of the world as it is.
- There are always pylons! Life is far from perfect in oh, so many ways. Millions of unloved homeless refugees; the eradication of coral reefs due to global warming; The fact that life on earth is not guaranteed and death is universal. You'd have to be some sort of monster to hanker after all that as part of life 'getting back to normal'! If we manage to remember the pylons then we are immediately not so self-centred. That's allowing the transformation that comes through resurrection into the transfiguration.
- And that allows the resolution that Jesus offers to make an entrance. Paul writes *'For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord'*, which seems to be saying the same thing. Taking the spotlight off ourselves and keeping it firmly on Jesus. *'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.'*
- That's the message of the transfiguration. And I suspect that's why we read it on the Sunday before Lent. I pray that, as a Church, we are awake enough to enjoy the view as it really is, edgy enough to be able to say so, and human enough to offer the challenges of this to the Light of the World who links earth to the Kingdom of God and *'and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them.'* Do you agree? In the ..