

**THE REVD JONATHAN AITKEN SERMON**  
**Sunday 15 February 2026**



**ST MATTHEW'S WESTMINSTER**  
20 Great Peter St, London SW1P 2BU

**Matthew 17: 1-9**

In the 27 or so years that I have been involved in prisons, as a chaplain, a chapel volunteer and as a prisoner I have met some unforgettable characters and one particularly colourful one was a guy everyone called 'Wossit'!

That was because he only ever had one greeting not hello or hi or good morning. Indeed, this old lag's invariable opening line was: "Wossit's all about?" "That's wot I want to know....." "Wossit's all about?"

Now, this character fell out of the attic of my memory when I was preparing today's sermon for the episode of the Transfiguration described in our Reading. For the episode of the Transfiguration is one of the most puzzling, most baffling, most mystical and most strange supernatural visions in the New Testament. So that old lag's inquiry "Wossit's all about then?" seems a rather appropriate question.

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Let's have a try at unpacking this story. What are the ingredients?

A Mountain – by tradition, Mt Tabor, the highest peak in Israel, clouds, the appearances of Moses and Elijah and finally the Voice of God, speaking out of the clouds – a voice which terrifies the three disciples who are accompanying Jesus on the mountain. What is it all about and what does it mean?

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Let's begin with the mountain. Often in biblical literature, the well springs of spiritual mystery are to be found in the mountain and echoes of these mysteries are sometimes felt in modern times. Take, for example, these lines from the 20<sup>th</sup> century, mystical poet, William Blake:

*"Great things are done when men and mountains meet.*

*This is not done by jostling in the street."*

(William Blake 1908)

In the chronicles of the Old Testament, we are told that Moses met God on Mount Sinai and after that encounter, Moses came down and gave the people of Israel God's law, the Ten Commandments.

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And then Elijah, the greatest prophet of God, also met God in the mountains where he encountered the divine presence not in the earthquake, not in the wind and not in the fire but when he heard the still, small voice of calm.

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And then there are the clouds, another great symbol of Old Testament mysticism because they are often the heralds of God's presence. Sometimes they are dark and thunderous, sometimes they are blazing with fire. But, in this Transfiguration story they are benign, bright and shining clouds from which the Voice of God speaks to say:

"This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" Interestingly, this is the second occasion in the Gospels that the voice of God is heard from the clouds.

The first time (which came in our reading last month) was at the moment of Jesus's baptism. Interestingly the words are identical in both readings. Why did God need to say these words – twice?

It was for the benefit of the disciples. They were not the brightest buttons on the beach at the best of times. And here on the mountains where the Transfiguration takes place, impulsive but ignorant Peter not for the first time gets the wrong end of the stick and starts wittering on with banal suggestions asking whether he should put up three tents for Jesus, Moses and Elijah!

Peter is behaving like a Red Coat organising a happy camper's afternoon at Butlins! He has completely missed the point that he is privileged to be

witnessing a supernatural event of great holiness – a vision of God's eternity and glory. Peter did get there in the end because after he and the other disciples heard the voice of God from the clouds, they fell to the ground overcome by fear until Jesus touched them saying: "Get up and do not be afraid."

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So what is it all about then? For a mortal contemporary preacher to interpret a supernatural event is high-risk territory. Yet I suggest that there are four themes to be considered here: Eternity, glory, holiness and freedom from fear. All of them are relevant to our lives today.

On eternity, we need to recognise that the Transfiguration is not a physical event in linear time or history. We have soared away into the everlasting realms of eternity. Just to come down to earth for a moment with a touch of humour, there is an old cricket joke which consists of a witty Frenchman offering a *bon mot* after attending a Test Match at Lords.

"*Mon Dieu*, cricket is a game invented by ze English, who, not being a spiritual people, needed something to give them the concept of eternity." Now 5-day Test Matches – let alone 2-Day Test Matches in the recent Ashes series - do not give anyone the concept of eternity! Even at Lords or anywhere else - we just don't get it.

Being creatures of human time, we can barely grasp the concept of eternity. But the witnesses of the Transfiguration vision evidently did catch glimpses of Moses and Elijah. A cynic might ask: "How on earth did the disciples recognise them?"

But those who have crossed the bridge of faith do not remain cynics. And that's why they also so clearly heard the voice from the cloud of God Himself, resounding across the frontiers of time and space.

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Alongside eternity, the Transfiguration also gives us an idea of God's glory. Perhaps we are on slightly more familiar territory because from time to time in our mortal lives, any of us may be fortunate enough to hear or see the Glory of God in nature, in art, in music or in the goodness of other human beings.

Perhaps such human beings are saints. Even St Valentine who, despite the crass commercialism of his day in florists and greeting card shops, nevertheless remains the Saint of Love. That noblest of human emotions. When Augustine wrote: "Love – and then do what you like" he struck a chord which echoes across the mountains and the millennia in many human hearts today.

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A third theme from the Transfiguration is Holiness - or the recognition of holiness. We need to remember that at this point in the earthly life of Jesus, the disciples had not recognised who he was. They knew he could perform healing miracles. They knew he could calm a violent storm on the Sea of Galilee. They knew he could feed the 5,000 and walk on water.

But who was Jesus? They did not know until the voice from the cloud of God said to them: "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" Did they get it? Do we get it today and recognise who Jesus was?

The Transfiguration is extraordinary but we have to accept that the recognition of God that flows from it came to those disciples from a celestial, not terrestrial, experience. Theologians call this 'Theophany' - a direct experience of God. It can be as real as ever today.

But to experience it, we may need to pass through the world of dreams and visions and supernatural experiences to see - perhaps through a glass darkly - as St Paul put it, the true nature and reality of God. We may, at first, like the disciples, feel afraid at such a moment in our own lives. Because, for all the glimpses of eternity, and for all the glory, our visions of God may well contain the ingredient of fear and acute discomfort.

In the calendar of the Church, the Transfiguration comes to us when we are on the edge of Lent: The season of spiritual discipline, resistance to temptation and self-denial. Perhaps it is the combination of Lenten asceticism, preceded by the glory of the Transfiguration, that we come to know that we have a God who both reigns above us and suffers with us.

The agony of the Cross is yet to come, but so is the miracle of the Resurrection that changed the world, drives away our fears and glorified God for all time.

The Transfiguration is a mystical milestone on our Christian journey. Enjoying it is easy. Understanding it is difficult.

And experiencing it is a challenge, particularly to those going through a period of suffering - as, of course, Jesus himself did in the immediate aftermath of the Transfiguration.

All of us have our moments of suffering when we fall to the ground, overcome by fear. But conquering that fear, getting up and ceasing to be afraid are Transfigurational experiences waiting to be emulated by those who hear God's call from the cloud: "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"

**AMEN**