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**Sunday 14 February to Sunday 21 February**

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Sunday 14 February 2021

# Transfiguration – a four-act play

by Martin Oldfield

**‘“Listen to him!” Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus’ (Mark 9:7b,8).**

Read Mark 9:2–10

The Transfiguration is a mixture of theatre, history, prophecy, and covert operations. There are many themes, but one overarching message. Jesus was anything but conventional in his approach.

Peter, James and John were in Jesus’ inner circle. Only a few days earlier, Peter acknowledged that Jesus was the Messiah and was horrified when told that he was going to die (Mark 8:29–33). Jesus gave them a dramatic lesson in a four-act play.

Act 1: He took them up a mountain – the setting for many biblical encounters with God. He shone in his glorified form – no wonder they were terrified!

Act 2: Entering from stage left, the long-dead Moses and Elijah appeared and started talking to Jesus about his impending death (Luke 9:31). The disciples knew who the pair were: Moses received the law, and Elijah represented the prophets of the Old Testament. Peter offered to build three identical tents – a physical place for each of these three to reside, effectively putting Jesus on par with Moses and Elijah. Peter still had much to learn!

Act 3: The play reaches its crescendo with the Father appearing from a cloud and saying those immortal words, ‘This is my Son whom I love. Listen to him!’ And – shazam! Moses and Elijah disappeared, leaving Jesus centre stage. The message was loud and clear. Jesus is the fulfilment of the law and the prophets. His is the only voice you need. Moses led his people out of the bondage of the Egyptians; Jesus will lead his people out of the bondage of sin.

Act 4: And finally, the covert bit – ‘Don’t tell anyone about this until I have risen from the dead’. That threw them for a loop as they had no idea what he meant by rising from the dead, despite having been told many times before. Those disciples were a bit thick at times!

The message for us today is equally clear. We can be a bit thick at times also. Listen to him!  The Son of Man has risen! We are free to talk and tell everyone about the beautiful, playful and wonderful God we can call our dad! Let’s revel in that freedom and do just that!

**Dear Dad, I love your unconventional approach to meeting people where they are and showing them what it means to be loved. Please help me to show those people you place in my path the joy of knowing you. Please give me the words that they need to hear from you. Amen.**

Monday 15 February 2021

# The call to serve

by Martin Oldfield

**‘And Moses said, “Here I am”’ (Exodus 3:4).**

Read Exodus 3:1–6

Today’s reading highlights a typical encounter with the God of Creation. There is often a mountain involved and nearly always fire. And fear and trembling. Oh, and it was often the lowliest of people going up the mountain. Moses was a shepherd (a lowly job). He went up Mt Horeb, and there was a burning bush (the fire bit). He hid his face (the fear bit). God called ‘Moses, Moses’, and Moses’ simple reply of ‘Here I am’ indicated his willingness to listen to God. If you read a little further, you will discover that he wasn’t entirely enamoured with what God then told him to do, but that is a whole other story.

And we can see ourselves in this story. We are privileged to live in the time after the resurrection. We don’t have to go up a mountain and look for a fire to find God and hear his voice. We don’t have to hide our face in fear because we have Abba Father – our Heavenly Dad – who has always longed for a relationship with us, his children. In the Bible, we have his word at our fingertips. We can go there and hear his voice at any time. We can find out what he is asking us to do. God talks to us from his word – no fire needed today! And we will often say ‘Here I am’ … until we discover what it is that he is asking of us. It is very easy to say ‘Here I am’, but a whole lot harder to say ‘and now I will do what you ask of me’.

It is even harder to actually go and do what God has asked us to do. It takes more than going to church on Sunday and living a ‘good life’ (judged against what standard?!) to be called a Christian. It takes a lot more than simply saying ‘Here I am’ to be called a follower and disciple of Jesus. God doesn’t need high powered, successful people to do his work – all he needs is any person prepared to say ‘Here I am’ and mean it. God longs for you to be a person who says ‘Here I am’ and then he loves to help you mean it.

**Dear Dad, here I am! My spirit is willing, but sometimes my flesh is weak. Please grant me the strength to carry out the work you created me to do with a joyful heart and a willing spirit. Amen.**

Tuesday 16 February 2021

# Discipleship

by Martin Oldfield

**‘We’re not keeping this quiet, not on your life’ (2 Corinthians 4:13).**

Read 2 Corinthians 4:13–5:1

Paul was the evangelist to the Gentiles and a church-planter extraordinaire, and he got a hard time for his efforts. He was telling the good news of the resurrected Jesus to a mostly unreceptive world. False prophets were using flashy methods to undo the gospel message that Paul was giving (2 Corinthians 11), and there was grumbling among the church members (1 Corinthians 1:10–13). He was continually addressing problems that arose within the new churches that diverted attention from the message of grace.

Sound familiar? Can you think of any televangelists preaching a prosperity gospel? And who has not seen grumbling and disunity within our churches? And hasn’t our materialistic, consumer-mad culture diverted much of our attention away from the gospel message of grace? Is there any reason why we would think that the task given to us today should be any easier than Paul had it?

What was Paul’s answer to these challenges? ‘We’re not keeping this quiet, not on your life!’ And why did he take this approach? To glorify God: ‘more and more grace, more and more people, more and more praise’. Paul issued a challenge to us in the 21st century – don’t keep the good news a secret. Don’t expect an easy time. Jesus says, ‘Go and make disciples’ (Matthew 28:19), and we say, ‘But I can’t do that’ or ‘I’m not gifted like that’. But he answers, ‘Maybe you can’t, but with me you can’. There are endless ways of spreading the good news – what ways come to your mind?

**Dear Dad, loving you is easy; loving our neighbour is a little harder. But this making of disciples bit is a big stretch. There are so many distractions. Please give me the courage and the words to say when needed so that more and more people can come to love you. Amen.**

Wednesday 17 February 2021

# The world is not a stage

by Martin Oldfield

**‘Be especially careful when you are trying to be good so that you don’t make a performance out of it’ (Matthew 6:1a).**

Read Matthew 6:1–6,16–21

Today’s text follows directly after the Sermon on the Mount and the call to love our enemy. On the mountain, Jesus told us to let our light shine and be the salt of the earth. He told us to let our good deeds be seen so that people may glorify God (Matthew 5:16).

In this text, he tells us to give, pray and fast in private; to do otherwise means no reward in heaven! Is he contradicting himself? No! He was declaring what his kingdom would be like. And his kingdom was not in opposition to worldly kingdoms but in opposition to the devil himself and his manifestations.

One of the manifestations was the penchant for slavishly obeying the law. Another was the religious leaders of the time who promulgated such thoughts. Giving alms to the poor ostentatiously, praying overtly and fasting to the point of neglect were common methods of proving one’s righteous demeanour. He didn’t tell us not to help the poor, pray or fast – he simply told us to do it in the right spirit – to further the kingdom, not feed the ego. Why not spend time in prayer looking for his guidance about what he would like you to do to further his kingdom?

**Dear Dad, I’ve got no doubt that there are many things that I am doing that if I am really honest with myself are feeding my ego. Please bring these to my attention and redirect my energy to doing those things that glorify you, not me. Amen.**

Thursday 18 February 2021

# Traditions and rituals

by Martin Oldfield

**‘You’re interested in religion; I’m interested in people’ (Zechariah 7:6).**

Read Zechariah 7:4–10

Today’s reading goes to the heart of what it means to worship God.

Here is the backstory: Solomon’s temple was destroyed in 586 BC, and rebuilding began 70 years later. The Jews established several festivals commemorating various aspects of the fall of Jerusalem. None of these festivals was commanded by God, and they had been celebrated for the past 70 years.

The second temple was now under construction, and the Jewish leaders came to Zechariah to ask if they still needed to celebrate these festivals. He asked them the most basic question: are you celebrating these festivals to glorify God, or are you doing it as an excuse for a party?

The fact that they even asked the question suggests that the festivals had become a meaningless ritual. They had elevated these non-commanded festivals above the things that had been commanded regarding justice, mercy and compassion.

This begs the question: do we ritualise things that are unimportant to God and avoid those things that we have been commanded to do? Look at the western church. Do we see rituals being glorified – liturgical forms, music choices, dress codes, motivational speakers/preachers, beautiful buildings, great programs, etc?

If you ask someone in the street what they think of when they hear the word ‘church’ or ‘religion’, it is highly likely they will speak of a building, rituals or traditions associated with a particular group of ‘religious’ people.

Do we think that well-attended church services on a Sunday measure the success of the church? Or is God looking for clear evidence of our heart to obey his commands out of a joyous response to his incredible love toward us? Have we muddied the waters by glorifying things that are not important and forgotten to do those things that are important – like loving God, loving our neighbour, and making disciples? Amazing things will happen when we listen to what God wants and then do them! What do you think the results might be?

**Dear Dad, you know that bright and shiny things are attractive to human hearts and minds. I’m no different – there are lots of things that I hang onto because they are familiar and comfortable. Please show me the things that you want me to be comfortable in doing as part of your plan for me, and give me the courage and willingness to do them. Amen.**

Friday 19 February 2021

# In over our heads

by Martin Oldfield

**‘“Why couldn’t we drive it out?” [Jesus] replied, “This kind can only come out by prayer”’ (Mark 9:28,29).**

Read Mark 9:14–29

This story started back in Mark 3 when Jesus appointed his 12 disciples and gave them the power to cast out demons. Peter, James and John had been up the mountain attending the Transfiguration while the remaining nine were left to deal with the Jewish religious leaders and a crowd watching as the nine newbies tried to cast out a demon in a child. It didn’t happen – they couldn’t do it.

When Jesus arrived on the scene, he got frustrated that neither his disciples nor the Jewish leaders were able to cast out the demon. You bunch of wallies, he seemed to be saying. He proceeded to do the job himself.

The reality was that the disciples were in over their heads. They couldn’t figure out why they could not cast out this demon when they had been able to do so before (Mark 6:13). Jesus’ answer cut to the heart of the problem – you cannot do this on your own strength but only by asking God to do it. The disciples had begun to think that, somehow, they had been casting out the demons under their own strength, not by God’s authority and power.

And so often, we fall into this trap. We find ourselves in a situation that we know needs us to respond, and we either do nothing or try to solve the problem on our own. We are in over our heads. And then we realise that what God has asked us to do is beyond our abilities on our own. He tells us ‘Of course I will ask you to do things that you can only achieve if you rely on me to help you – otherwise you wouldn’t need faith’ (Matthew 17:20). He tells us to love our enemies, forgive our brothers, go and make disciples, but we reply, ‘I can’t do that’, or ‘I’m not gifted like that’. In response, God says, ‘You might be in over your head, but with me, you can do it all’. Just imagine for a moment what would happen if our actions showed that we believe this promise!

**Dear Dad, I’m in over my head. I want to love you, love my neighbour and make disciples for your kingdom. But often I simply can’t do it – these are easy to say but so hard to do. I need your strength to do the things you ask me to do. Please help! Amen.**

Saturday 20 February 2021

# Faith under fire

by Martin Oldfield

**‘Do not let me be put to shame nor let my enemies triumph over me. Guide me in your truth’ (Psalm 25:2,5).**

Read Psalm 25:1–10

David was at war on many fronts. He fought military battles with the Philistines, the Moabites, the Ammonites, the Syrians, the Edomites and a few others to boot (2 Samuel 8–10). He fought verbal wars: ‘howling like dogs and prowling about the city ... bellowing with their mouths, with sharp words on their lips’ (Psalm 59:6–7). And ‘their tongue sharp as a snake's; and under their lips is the venom of vipers’ (Psalm 140:3). He fought moral wars: people lying, saying one thing and doing another (Psalm 109); oppressing the poor (Psalm 10); bribery (Psalm 26:10); and judicial corruption (Psalm 109:5–10). He had more enemies than he could poke a stick at! No wonder he was moved to cry out in anguish ‘Do not let my enemies triumph over me’.

Deadset, he could have been writing about us. We still have wars and lying, cheating, corruption and oppression. But we have raised verbal wars to new heights through the internet and social media platforms. God, in dealing with the Tower of Babel dilemma, declared that if humans speak the same language and can build a tower, then nothing will be impossible for them (Genesis 11:6).

In other words, a universal language will become a problem. English has become a universal language. Our instant access to information and social platforms has become a problem. In a few keystrokes, a nameless person can destroy another’s worth, reputation and life.

In a recent study, 60% of millennials said that technology and digital interactions make them more careful about how they share their faith, and 58% state that people are now more likely to see them as offensive if they share their faith (Barna Research in Faith for Exiles, p27).

We live in an increasingly global, secular, and materialistic society that shames people when they speak of their faith. Doesn’t this sound a lot like David’s dilemma, ‘Do not let my enemies shame me’?

David cried out ‘Guide me in your truth’. He understood that looking to God was the only antidote to feeling shame. We need to understand this, as well. We are sons and daughters of the Creator, and our identity is determined by this relationship. It is in his truth and through this relationship that we find the antidote to the shame piled upon us by those who do not know and love God.

**Dear Dad, I live in a world that makes it very hard for me to tell people about you. This has probably been the case throughout history, but that doesn’t help me here and now. Please guide me in your truth as I revel in my identity as your child and shamelessly tell the world about you. Amen.**

Sunday 21 February 2021

# Beloved

by Sue Westhorp

**‘And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased”’ (Mark 1:11).**

Read Mark 1:9–15

Today, we hear from the Gospel of Mark, the gospel that doesn’t include any stories of Jesus’ background, family or birth – there are no shepherds, angels or wise men. Instead, we are taken straight to the announcement and confirmation of who Jesus really is. God himself says, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved. With you, I am well pleased’. So, the very first thing that Mark does is to tell us exactly who Jesus is. For Mark, this is the starting point of the gospel, the very first thing that matters.

You know, one of the things that I love about this event out in the Jordan River is what God does not say. God doesn’t say, ‘I’m well pleased with Jesus because he has proved to me that he deserves it – he has quiet time with me each night, he always reads the Scriptures, and he really knows how to heal people’. No, nothing like that. As far as we know from all the gospels together, this is the start of Jesus’ ministry – so far, he hasn’t really done anything, and yet, he was called beloved – the one in whom the Father was well pleased.

And at your own baptism, you didn’t have to do anything. In your baptism, God proclaimed that you are his beloved child, and claimed you and named you as God’s own. God’s love is his free gift to you – just like your baptism is his gift, too. Baptism is not a ritual that we give to God, but God’s act on us.

As Mark recorded, Jesus’ baptism was an event of cosmic proportions, one that prepared him for what came next, because immediately following his baptism, that same Spirit – the one who first looked like a peaceful dove – sent him out into the wilderness for 40 days. Perhaps you know something of the wilderness, of uncertainty, of fear. In the midst of the wilderness, what is it that we can hold onto? What is it that we know? We know who and whose we are – God’s beloved children, with whom he is well pleased. Live in the love, light and promise of this good news!

**Loving God, thank you for claiming us as your own through baptism. When we experience wilderness in our lives, remind us of our identity in you. Amen.**