

HEARERS OF THE WORD



Genesis 15:5-12, 17-18; Psalm 27 (26); Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 9:28-36

This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!

Luke 9:28 Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. 29 And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. 30 Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. 31 They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. 32 Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. 33 Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah” —not knowing what he said. 34 While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. 35 Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” 36 When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The transfiguration is recounted in all three Synoptic Gospels. It is well worth comparing the three accounts in order to notice what each writer chose to highlight. There are three layers to the account: (i) what “happened” originally, if it can be reconstructed; (ii) the theophany as an experience for the three chosen apostles; (iii) the place and function of the story within each Gospel.

Working backwards, each writer uses the story with different emphases. In Mark 9:2-10, it is an epiphany, an anticipation of the end, to give the disciples courage during the passion. In Matthew 17:1-9, it is an apocalyptic vision, again to give courage, but with a special intensity. Luke, avoiding the word transfiguration (*metamorphosis*) with its pagan overtones, portrays the encounter as a moment of prayer consistent with Luke’s portrait of Jesus as a man of prayer—in this Gospel, he is shown at prayer twice as frequently as in Matthew and Mark. The disappearance of Moses and Elijah is part of Luke’s theology that the times were changing and a new era beginning, with the new exodus (= departure), explicitly identified with the cross and resurrection of Jesus. All three Gospels make the connection with the Baptism.

Special to Luke

- Eight days, to pray
- His appearance changed
- His departure (*exodus*); Jerusalem
- The disciples remain awake
- As they were leaving...
- They entered the cloud
- Silence descends (not instructed)

As a theophany, or even as a “Christophany”, the story shows the marks of such accounts: the *mysterium* (elusive), *tremendum* (awesome) *et fascinans* (delightful). Behind the traditions, lies a profound spiritual experience of Jesus, shared with the apostles. As with all authentic religious experiences, it can be conveyed in symbol and metaphor but never directly described. For an example, see 2 Corinthians 12 below.

	Readings	Topic	Message
LENT 2	Gen 15:5-12, 17-18	<i>Abraham</i>	Covenant
COVENANT	Ps 27 (26)	<i>Trust and hope</i>	Seek his face
	Phil 3:17-4:1	<i>Faithfulness</i>	Remain true!
	Lk 9:28-36	<i>Transfiguration</i>	Listen to him!

Thought for the day

Stories of extraordinary experiences can leave us feeling on the outside—such moments of intense awareness of presence *are* rare and fleeting. And yet, we all have our inklings of something more, the surprise of God in the midst of the everyday. Any deep experience, when we take time to reflect on it and appropriate it, will disclose to us “the beyond in the midst” in Bonhoeffer’s happy phrase. Love, birth, death, a child, nature, music, goodness and so on—all tokens of the something more which draws us on.

Prayer

God of surprises, you are the beyond in the midst of life, always there to take us by surprise and delight us with your presence. Amen, amen!

KIND OF WRITING

The Transfiguration belongs to a recognisable type of story, of which there are many examples in the Old Testament and a few examples in the New Testament. This kind of story is the appearance of a god (= *theophany*). An example of such a story would be stories such as Isaiah 6 or Numbers 12 or 1 Kings 19:8-13. Commonly such “appearance stories” take place on a mountain, there is a voice from the cloud, there is some unnatural light or radiance. Those experiencing the vision are both attracted and frightened. Usually, there is a word of reassurance.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

(i) Both Moses and Elijah were expected to usher in the end. In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus himself is Moses and Elijah. *The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet.* (Deut 18:15). *Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes.* (Mal 4:5)

(ii) Moses: Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. Now

the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights. (Exod 24:15–18)

Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. (Exod 34:29)

(iii) Elijah: At that place Elijah came to a cave, and spent the night there.

Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” He answered, “I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.” He said, “Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.” Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” (1 Kgs 19:9–13)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

Now when all the people were baptised, and when Jesus also had been baptised and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” (Luke 3:21–22)

ST PAUL

It is necessary to boast; nothing is to be

gained by it, but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows—was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. (2 Cor 12:1–6)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 28 After which words? *Truly I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God.* The *eight* days should be six, but eight may refer to the day of resurrection. To pray marks a special emphasis in Luke.

Verse 29 *When he was praying* — Luke makes prayer the explicit setting. The appearance of his face became “other.” Luke avoids the word *metamorphosis* used by the other gospels, perhaps because it was current in pagan cults and he writes for a Gentile audience. “Dazzling” in Luke makes a verbal link with the resurrection proclamation at the empty tomb.

Verse 30 Two men, i.e. another link to the empty tomb proclamation at 24:4.

Verse 31 Talking to him about his *exodus* that is, the cross and resurrection will be a new exodus for all people. Jerusalem is mentioned because in Luke-Acts, Jerusalem is the centre of salvation: 9:31, 51,53; 13:22, 33; 17:11; 18:31; 19:11; 24:47-49, 52; Acts 1:8.

Verse 32 The disciples overcome their sleepiness to witness the vision.

Verse 33 As they are leaving him, Peter speaks. The title used is important. Master is found only in Luke and suggests a special relationship with the inner group, in contrast with Lord and teacher.

Verse 34 Luke times the fear to coincide with entering into the cloud, i.e. sharing the awesome experience.

Verse 35 The chosen or “elect” is a term found in the Lucan writings. Listening and hearing are a feature of the Lucan proclamation since ch. 4.

Verse 36 Luke eliminates the discussion of the resurrection and the so-called messianic secret command. We are left with the impression that silence descended upon them naturally on account of the extraordinary nature of the experience.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The transfiguration experience was one that affirmed Jesus’ identity as the beloved disciple of God and strengthened him for the future. What have been the experiences, the moments of insight, that have clarified your sense of who you are and being beloved by God?

2. On the mountain the disciples saw Jesus in a new way. Sometimes in friendships there are moments of sharing in which we get to know a friend in a new and deeper way. Have you had that experience in human friendship, or in your relationship with Jesus, with God, or with the Spirit of God within? Recall when it happened and what it was like for you?

3. For the disciples, the experience also served as a reminder that their task as they accompanied Jesus on the road to Jerusalem was really to listen to him. This puts our Lenten efforts in context. What have you found helpful to get you to listen and to understand more deeply the meaning of the life and message of Jesus?

PRAYER

God of the Covenant, your presence fills us with awe, your word gives us unshakable hope. Fix in our hearts the image of your Son in glory, that, sustained on the path of discipleship, we may pass over with him to newness of life. We make our prayer through Christ, our deliverance and hope, who lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen.

Lent 1	Deuteronomy 26:4-10	Creed	Ps 91 (90)	Roman 10:8-13	Luke 4:1-13
Lent 2	Genesis 15:5-12, 17-18	Covenant	Ps 27 (26)	Phil 3:17-4:1	Luke 9:28-36
Lent 3	Exodus 3:1-8,13-15	Burning bush	Ps 103 (102)	1 Cor 10:1-6,10-12	Luke 13:1-9
Lent 4	Joshua 5:9-12	First Passover	Ps 34 (33)	2 Cor 5:17-21	Lk 15:1-3,11-32
Lent 5	Isaiah 43:16-21	A new deed	Ps 126 (125)	Philippians 3:8-14	John 8:1-11

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, stand firm in the Lord

Phil 3:15 *Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you.* 16 *Only let us hold fast to what we have attained.*

Phil 3:17 Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. 18 For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. 19 Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. 20 But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. 21 He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.

Phil 4:1 Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The tone of exhortation suits the season of Lent, as does the emphasis on restraint of appetite. The introductory verses added here are important: they introduce this exhortation and link it closely with the rest of the letter (cf. “mind” elsewhere in Philippians).

KIND OF WRITING

The whole document is a “letter of friendship,” with many exhortations to unity and steadfastness. The overall letter has the following pattern:

(*Letter opening*: 1:1-2)

Introduction: 1:3-11

Situation: 1:12-26

Thesis: 1:27-30

Proof: 2:1-3:19

First development, 2:1-18

Second development, 2:19-3:1a

Third development, 3:1b-19

Conclusion: 3:20-4:20

(*Letter closing*: 4:21-23)

According to this schema, our reading bridges the third proof (3:1b-19) and the extended conclusion (3:20-4:20).

ORIGIN OF THE READING

Still, I think it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus—my brother and co-worker and fel-

low soldier, your messenger and minister to my need; for he has been longing for all of you, and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. He was indeed so ill that he nearly died. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, so that I would not have one sorrow after another. I am the more eager to send him, therefore, in order that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious. Welcome him then in the Lord with all joy, and honour such people, because he came close to death for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for those services that you could not give me. (Philippians 2:25–30)

RELATED PASSAGES

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. (Phil 2:1–5)

Be imitators of me, in so far as I in turn am an imitator of Christ. (1 Cor 11:1; cf. 1 Thess 1:6.)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 17 The first word in Greek is arresting: *symmimētai*, that is “fellow imitators.” The word is found nowhere else in all Greek literature. However, see above 1 Cor 11:1 and 1 Thess 1:6. The precise meaning is difficult to establish. Perhaps: imitate me with one accord, referring to the need for unity and *koinōnia*. Paul was indeed single-minded and extraordinarily dedicated to Christ in his discipleship. The “us” at the end indicates that this is not simply Paul’s example (*typos*) but the general witness of all who follow Christ.

Verse 18 Suddenly, we are confronted with the opposite, that is, bad example, so bad that Paul is moved to tears. Given the emotional reaction, it is most likely that these “enemies of the cross” are not outsiders but professed Christians. V. 19 seems to indicate that it is not the *doctrine* but the *behaviour* of such people which causes Paul to weep. Their behaviour may include opposition to the Pauline

mission from professed Christians.

Verse 19 Paul manages to be both concise and terrifying in this four-fold prediction. In Greek, the verbs are suppressed, lending an even more staccato-like tone. Perhaps most information is to be gleaned from *belly*: this could point to either libertines (over-indulging) or Judaizers (in reference to the dietary laws; cf. Rom 16:18). In themselves, the words *end* (destiny), *God* and *glory* are positive, but savagely reversed here. Note the caustic juxtaposition of glory and shame. For “earthly”, see Rom 8:5-6.

Verse 20 By contrast, our “belonging” is elsewhere. Paul uses the term, *politēuma*, commonwealth (the most common meaning at the time) or citizenship or even colony. Commonwealth, suggesting a dynamic and active engagement, is to be preferred. The contrast is not between the present and the future but rather between the earthly and heavenly spheres, which determine our way of life. Our *politēuma* is a present reality and not simply a future one. At the same time, there *is* a future dimension, as the next clause makes clear. The use of the word saviour is unexpectedly rare in Paul, in fact, only here in the undisputed letters. Perhaps the word had too many political overtones, as the Roman emperors did not hesitate to use the term for themselves. At Philippi, a Roman *colonia*, it would have had special power.

Verse 21 There are powerful echoes here of other passages in Paul, especially 1 Corinthians 15 but also 2 Cor 4:6 for the cosmic dimension. NB the explicit echoes of Phil 2:6-11, the Christ hymn. Already this future has been mentioned in Philippians (1:19, 28 and 2:12).

Verse 1 “Stand firm” is an echo of 1:27, thus closing this long discussion. Joy is a theme throughout the letter. The imagery of “crown” may have been triggered by the athletic imagery in Phil 3:12-14. Paul’s warm attachment is everywhere very much in evidence.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Do I have models, people who inspire me, whom I would like to emulate?
2. Can I name my “citizenship,” my deep identity in Christ?

PRAYER

Faithful God, bless us on our pilgrimage, help us to stand firm that we may know joy in believing. Amen.

To your descendants I give this land

Gen. 15:1 After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." 2 But Abram said, "O LORD God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" 3 And Abram said, "You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir." 4 But the word of the Lord came to him, "This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir."

Gen. 15:5 He brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be." 6 And he believed the LORD; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Gen. 15:7 Then he said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess." 8 But he said, "O LORD God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?" 9 He said to him, "Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." 10 He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. 11 And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

Gen. 15:12 As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him. 13 Then the LORD said to Abram, "Know this for certain, that your offspring shall be aliens in a land that is not theirs, and shall be slaves there, and they shall be oppressed for four hundred years; 14 but I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. 15 As for yourself, you shall go to your ancestors in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. 16 And they shall come back here in the fourth generation; for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete."

Gen. 15:17 When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. 18 On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I give this land,

from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates."

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The book of Genesis is a multi-layered narrative, running from ancient oral tradition to recent "theology" retrojected. A key figure is Abraham and a key theme is the promise / covenant made to him and his descendants.

KIND OF WRITING

Covenant making at the time had a particular format and some of the features may be observed here. At the same time, when God graciously "commits" to Abraham etc. this resembles more a charter or a grant of rights by a sovereign, a deed of grace.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

We began last week with the wandering Aramean and today we continue with the story of Abraham. There are two stories: vv. 1-6 at night time, underlining Abraham's faith and 7-18 (21) at sunset, underlining God's faithfulness.

Something of the stitching to be found in Genesis may be observed here. Traditionally, our excerpt comes from the Yahwist (J): if one skipped (as does the lectionary) from v. 12 to v. 17, the passage flows extremely well. The intervening vv. 13-16 seem to reflect a later awareness of the descent into Egypt and of the Exodus.

The pattern of the two stories is:

Promise: v. 1 and v. 7.

Protest: vv. 2-3, v. 8.

Assurance: vv. 4-6, vv. 9-21.

1. *Echo* of a prophetic call: 1Sam 15:10; Ezek 1:3.
2. *Echo* of the Decalogue: Exodus 20:2
3. *Anticipation* of the Exodus: Gen 15:13-15

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to de-

stroy the earth." (Gen 9:8-12) Cf. Gen 17:1-8

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 5 The night sky, full of brilliant stars, creates both awe and the impossibility of calculation.

Verse 6 "Believed" could also be translated "trusted" and this might be better. Righteousness means right relationship and so Abraham has responded "correctly" to God's grace.

Verse 7 God identifies himself by reference to the call of Abraham in Genesis 12.

Verse 8 This is a protest. Cf. vv. 2-3.

Verse 9-11 Elements of covenant symbolism (blessings and curses). Implied is the idea that the covenanting parties draw such a fate on themselves should they break their word.

Verse 12 Sleep: cf. Adam. Darkness introduces the numinous, always terrifying.

Verse 17 The fire pot symbolises God (see Is 31:9) and God's unilateral commitment to Abraham.

Verse 18 The second part of Genesis 15 is concerned with the land, whereas the first part touches on the promise of descendants.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. God reminds Abraham of God's own "history" to evoke a memory of the God of the covenant who liberates. This is our God too.

2. Belief, or real reliance and trust, stands at the heart of our relationship with God, as St Paul teaches.

3. Perhaps the words of W. H. Auden may help: *To choose what is difficult all one's days, as if it were easy, that is faith.*

PRAYER

Faithful God of the covenant, like Abraham, without seeing, we believe. You hold out your promise to us, and like our father in faith, in you we place our absolute trust. Through Christ our Lord.

THE LITURGY

Genesis 15:5-12, 17-18; Psalm 27 (26); Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 9:28-36

READINGS 1 AND 3

The Genesis reading is a theophany, an experience similar to the Transfiguration. Both invite hearing and faith.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

The Psalm does respond to the reading from Genesis, but it also looks forward to the Gospel.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First Reading

Genesis 15:5-12, 17-18

At every Mass, we hear the word “covenant.” A covenant is an agreed commitment and in today’s reading God “commits” himself, so to speak, to Abraham and his descendants.

Second Reading

Philippians 4:17-4:1

In what was possibly his last letter, Paul writes as an old man about the true homeland of the Christian.

Gospel

Luke 9:28-36

The heart of this story lies in the words from the cloud: Listen to him!

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 17 March

See special notes for St Patrick’s Day

Daniel 9:4-10

Daniel prays a great prayer which we could make our own today. The Psalm takes up the same theme of forgiveness.

Luke 6:36-38

Pardon is free from God — but it is truly “ours” only when we pardon in return.

Tuesday 18 March

Isaiah 1:10, 16-20

Following an opening command to wash and make ourselves clean, no fewer than seven imperatives help us to think practically of changes in our lives.

Matthew 23:1-12

Matthew is aware that religious leaders can “lose the run of themselves,” as we

say. This is true in our Gospel of the Pharisees, but the the Gospel goes on to issue a warning also to Christian leaders: they are not to be called rabbi or father or teacher. Why is that the case?

Wednesday 19 March

St Joseph, husband of the BVM

2 Samuel 7:4-5, 12-14, 16

God’s fidelity *through time* is expressed in his commitment to the family of David, of which Jesus will be born.

Romans 4:13, 16-18, 22

Abraham trusted against all the odds — as did his later descendant Joseph.

Matthew 1:16, 18-21, 24

Joseph of the Gospels reminds us of Joseph of Genesis, who dreamed and who saved his family.



Thursday 20 March

Jeremiah 17:5-10

Two ways of life are contrasted today and, as always, the choice is ours. The contrast is sharply drawn. We do know that things are not so black and white in reality; however, the offer of two different ways of life still stands. The psalm going with this reading is perfect.

Luke 16:19-31

The story of the rich man (*Dives* in Latin) and the poor man, Lazarus, is unique to this Gospel. The story is pretty

clear and it would be hard to miss the message. The exploration of the parable in the last paragraph, however, is larded with irony...are we among those who would not be convinced even in someone should rise from the dead?

Friday 21 March

Genesis 37:3-4, 12-13, 17-28

The ordinary mass goer might well ask why this reading and what is it about? The story of the rejection of Joseph by his brothers is interesting and significant of itself. Today, however, it is told to anticipate a similar rejection in the Gospel, the rejection of Jesus and his mission. In the case of Joseph, the rejected one became the saviour when there was a famine in the land of Canaan. Likewise, the rejected Jesus became a saviour but not merely to one family but to the whole human race.

Matthew 21:33-43, 45-46

In the Old Testament, there are passages which talk about Israel as God’s vineyard, a metaphor which undergirds today’s parable. The parable on the lips of Jesus may have been simpler. The version we have in the Gospel reflects the context of Matthew’s community and the later application of Psalms to Jesus’ own death and resurrection.

Saturday 22 March

Micah 7:14-15, 18-20

Today we hear a great prayer for forgiveness, a confident prayer because the Lord is our shepherd. It would make a terrific reflection on God’s mercy and compassion. It does prepare us to hear with fresh ears the parable of the prodigal son.

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

As often, it can be hard to hear what is so familiar so that we are addressed again, so a special effort is needed. It might be good to focus on the stay-at-home brother and his resentments. Do I find such flinty resistance in myself? In my community? In our society? Even as we find this in ourselves, it is good to recall that the parable ends *without* resolution, open-ended, so that forgiveness and compassion are always possible.