# Three Ways to Pray

# Luke 9: 28-36

# A Sermon preached at Pulaski Heights UMC, Little Rock on March 3, 2019 by Revd Dr Sam Wells

Twenty-five years ago, before the days of mobile phones, I was living in the north east of England. On a day off I was longing to find some fresh air and when a friend told me he was going to be in the Lake District, I jumped at the chance to take the couple of hours to drive over and join him for a day on the fells. We’d arranged to meet at a youth hostel, and I duly showed up a few minutes early. There wasn’t any sign of my friend. I ran through all the usual emotions. I started with the head, and wondered if we’d misunderstood the arrangements or I’d got the wrong hostel. I moved onto the heart, and wondered if he’d had an accident and was somewhere stricken and bleeding by a roadside. After 40 minutes I lapsed into the gut and was getting angry and frustrated and let down and cross.

At that moment my friend sauntered by wearing a pair of slippers and with a cup of coffee in his hand. I was speechless. We looked at each other as if we’d each seen a ghost. And then we both realised what had happened. The youth hostel had an upstairs. He’d been waiting for me there. It never occurred to him I wouldn’t look. If he hadn’t come in search of a cup of coffee we could have been like that for hours. I was downstairs, and never realised there was an upstairs. We were both speechless.

That experience is the best way I know to describe what the gospels call transfiguration. Half way through the gospel story the disciples know Jesus does plenty of amazing and wonderful things and says many beautiful and true things, but they still assume he’s basically the same as them. But then a couple of them go up on a mountain with him and it’s like the veil slips and they’re invited in to a whole other world. All the time they thought there was just a downstairs and then suddenly, exhilaratingly, they see there’s an upstairs too, and Jesus is completely at home in it, even when the Father’s voice thunders from above. And more remarkably still, it seems there’s a place for them in it, hanging out with the likes of Moses and Elijah. They’ve been given a glimpse of glory. It’s a glory that’s faithful to the story of Israel, a glory that has Jesus at the centre of it, a glory that has God speaking words of love, a glory that has a place for them in it, however stumbling and clumsy they are, and finally a glory in which Jesus touches them tenderly in their fear. That’s about all we need to know about glory, and they find it all out in a matter of seconds.

I want to suggest to you that this experience, this glimpse of glory, shapes the way we pray by giving our prayers the same extra dimension. Let me explain. Let’s start with a conversation over coffee after church. You say hi, you say haven’t talked for a while, you say how are you, what’s up, and you catch up on this or that. And then just as you’re finishing, your conversation partner holds your forearm, and their tone changes and is more serious, and they say ‘Say a prayer for my dad, will you, he’s not himself, the dementia’s really kicking in now, and I feel like he’s losing his identity inch by unrelenting inch.’ And you look into your friend’s eyes, and in them you see the cost of what it’s required to keep going, and of what it’s taken just to put that pain into words, and you say, ‘I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. This must be such a bewildering time for you. Of course I’ll pray for your dad. And I’ll pray for you too.’

But then you’ve made a promise. A promise you have to keep. How exactly do you pray for a person in such a situation? What words can you find to wrap around this kind of long, slow-burning tragedy, in which lives and souls unravel and there’s no sign of the dawn?

There’s two conventional ways to pray for your friend and their dad. I’m going to call the first way resurrection. It’s a call for a miracle. You just say, ‘God, by the power with which you raised Jesus from the dead, restore this man in mind and body, make him himself again, and bring my friend the joy of companionship and the hope of a long and fruitful family life together.’ There’s a big part of you that wants to pray this prayer. You love your friend. You see how watching their dad disintegrate before their eyes is breaking their heart. You want God to show some compassion, some change, some action. In the back of your head you maybe have a sense of some other Christians, perhaps close to you, who seem to pray for resurrection all the time, and you wonder if you should have more faith and expect God to do amazing things every day. But you’ve also seen hopes dashed, you’ve seen Alzheimer’s only end one way, and a part of you can’t even say the word ‘heal’ because it seems to be asking for something that just isn’t going to happen. That’s the prayer of resurrection. You know Christianity’s founded on it and you know it’s what your friend most longs for – but sometimes you just find it too hard to say.

But that’s not the only kind of prayer. The other conventional kind of prayer is the prayer of incarnation. It’s a call for the Holy Spirit to be with your friend and their father. It’s a recognition that Jesus was broken, desolate, alone, on the brink of death, and that this is all part of being a human being, all part of the deal you sign onto the day you’re born. Our bodies and minds are fragile, frail, and sometimes feeble. There’s no guarantee life will be easy, comfortable, fun, or happy. The prayer of incarnation says, ‘God, in Jesus you shared our pain, our foolishness, and our sheer bad luck; you took on our flesh with all its needs and clumsiness and weakness. Visit my friend and her father now: give them patience to endure what lies ahead, hope to get through every trying day, and companions to show them your love.’ The irony about this prayer is that the resurrection prayer expects God to do all the work, whereas this prayer stirs us into action ourselves. If we say ‘send them companions to show them your love,’ we’ve got to be wondering if there’s anyone better placed to be such a companion than we ourselves. Deep down our friend is well aware that the prospects for their father are pretty bleak. What they’re really asking for when they nervously put their hand out to clasp your forearm is, ‘Help me trust that I’m not alone in all of this.’ Chances are, you can help them with that. But in the midst of it all you’d hardly be human if you didn’t feel powerless and inadequate in the face of all they were going through.

I want to suggest that resurrection and incarnation aren’t the only kinds of prayer. I’m sure they’re the most common, and in many circumstances they say pretty much all we want or need or ought to say. But go back to my experience in the youth hostel, and even more to what the disciples saw on the mountain. This is a third kind of prayer – a prayer of transfiguration. In the youth hostel I discovered there was a whole reality going on that was part of my reality and affected my reality, but about which I was unaware and ignorant. On the mountain the disciples discovered that Christ was part of a conversation with Israel and God and was dwelling in glory in a way that they had no idea of and could hardly grasp and yet put everything on a different plane.

That’s an invitation to a third kind of prayer. ‘God, in your son’s transfiguration we see a whole reality within and beneath and beyond what we thought we understood; in their times of bewilderment and confusion, show my friend and her father your glory, that they may find a deeper truth to their life than they ever knew, make firmer friends than they ever had, discover reasons for living beyond what they’d ever imagined, and be folded into your grace like never before.’ This is a different kind of a prayer. The prayer of resurrection has a certain defiance about it – in the face of what seem to be all the known facts, it calls on God to produce the goods and turn the situation round. It has courage and hope but there’s always that fear that it has a bit of fantasy as well. The prayer of incarnation is honest and unflinching about the present and the future, but you could say it’s a little too much swathed in tragedy. Going back to the youth hostel analogy, it’s so concerned to face the reality of being downstairs that there’s always that fear that it’s never going to discover the glory of what lies above.

To work out the ingredients of the prayer of transfiguration, let’s go back to the transfiguration story we read together just now. There’s glory – the glory of the Lord in the face of Jesus Christ. There’s the pattern of God’s story in Israel and the church, a story that finds its most poignant moments in the midst of suffering and exile. There’s the loving, tender, presence and heavenly voice of God the Father – a voice that for the only time in their lives, the disciples hear and understand. And there’s the extraordinary realisation that, even though all this could have gone on without them, the disciples have been caught up in the life of the Trinity, the mystery of salvation, the unfolding of God’s heart, the beauty of holiness.

Maybe that’s your real prayer for your friend and their father. Maybe that’s your real prayer for yourself, in the midst of whatever it is you’re wrestling with today. Maybe that’s your prayer for the UMC this week. Not so much, ‘Fix this and take it off my desk!’ Nor even, ‘Be with me and share in my struggle, now and always.’ But something more like, ‘Make this trial and tragedy, this problem and pain, a glimpse of your glory, a window into your world, when I can see your face, sense the mystery in all things, and walk with angels and saints. Bring me closer to you in this crisis than I ever have been in calmer times. Make this a moment of truth, and when I cower in fear and feel alone, touch me, raise me, and make me alive like never before.’