

Welcome to our podcast today,

The sermon is preached by Martin Fair,
Moderator of the General Assembly

(pause)

Let's pray

Loving Father we come together now to meet
with you.

To be in your presence.

(pause)

We come to pray to you,

And just to sit in contemplation of all that you
are.

(pause)

Father as we hear the Bible being read help us
to listen.

Help us to hear you speak.

Change us through your word.

Transform us inwardly.

(pause)

We're listening Father.

Listening to what you are trying to teach us through Jesus words and actions.

(pause)

Amen.

Our reading today is from Mark's gospel

Reading from chapter 9.2-9

I'm reading from the Good News Translation of the bible.

Six days later Jesus took with him Peter, James, and John, and led them up a high mountain, where they were alone. As they looked on, a change came over Jesus, 3 and his clothes became shining white – whiter than anyone in the world could wash them.

4 Then the three disciples saw Elijah and Moses talking with Jesus. 5 Peter spoke up and said to Jesus, “Teacher, how good it is that we are here! We will make three tents, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” 6 He and the others were so frightened that he did not know what to say. 7 Then a cloud appeared and covered them with its shadow, and a voice came from the cloud, “This is my own dear Son – listen to him!” 8 They took a quick look round but did not see anyone else; only Jesus was with them. 9 As they came down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, “Don’t tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has risen from death.” 10 They obeyed his order, but among themselves they started discussing the matter, “What does this ‘rising from death’ mean?”

Sermon – The Right Reverend Dr Martin Fair, Moderator of the General Assembly

When you think about it, do you imagine God above you, looking down, or beside you, walking with you?

I want to suggest that this isn't an 'either, or' but a 'both, and.' And further, I want to suggest that, as Christians, any time we find ourselves thinking about what God is like - questions like this one - we should start by looking at Jesus. How so? Because seeing Jesus is seeing God. Knowing Jesus is knowing God.

Scripture tells us as much.

John writes that 'no one has ever seen God but that the only Son has made him known.'

Paul affirms as much in writing to the Colossians, declaring that, 'He - that is, Jesus - is the visible likeness of the invisible God.'

And in the opening verses of Hebrews, we read that, 'The Son is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being.'

Isn't that wonderful!? That Jesus is the exact likeness of God? It means that when we see who this Jesus was, as described in the gospels, we're seeing who God is.

Of course there will always be a sense in which God is shrouded in mystery - in light inaccessible, hid from our eyes. In this life our knowledge of God will always be partial; we see as in a mirror, dimly. And yet we're not completely in the dark. God reveals something of God's being and nature and character in Jesus.

So what is it about Jesus that might help us to think about God and whether God is above us, looking down, or with us?

Well as I said, I think it's both. Neither way of thinking about God is wrong but each needs the other to be right; at least if we're concerned to reflect the fulness of the picture.

And my hunch is that that's exactly what Peter, James and John learned from their mountain-top experience in what Phil read for us from Mark's Gospel and which we refer to as the Transfiguration.

Jesus had been and was with the disciples, day by day. They walked with him, ate with him, listened to him, asked him questions.

And yet in this moment, he was something much more and the glory of the divine blazed from him as a blinding light.

Of course this wasn't the only such occasion.

In response to Jesus having calmed the storm, his disciples asked each other, 'Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!'

And what must they have thought as he turned water to wine, as he healed those who were sick and cast out demons, and as he fed hungry crowds and even raised back to life those who had died?

They knew him in the everyday and ordinary.

And they knew him in the above and beyond, extraordinary - when their earthly, human categories were of no use to them.

So in relation to my original question, they were coming to see that Jesus was like them and yet wholly different from them - that he was with them yet, immeasurably so, above them.

To put that in some kind of theological framework, they were coming to see Jesus as possessing both 'meekness and majesty, manhood and deity.'

And here, friends, is the truth of it! They knew Jesus as teacher and friend but they were edging towards knowing him as Lord.

God is both transcendent and immanent.

Fancy words but simply meaning that God is both near and far, here yet there, with us and beyond us.

No doubt each of us, according perhaps to our Christian schooling or even our temperament, favours one of these ways of seeing God more than the other.

Some will focus on God as 'almighty,' 'maker of heaven and earth.'

Others will marvel that God is here, with us, close at hand... even, as Joan Osbourne's song, suggests, 'One of us.'

For my own part, I can say I lean in that direction - thinking about Jesus leads me to thinking about God as being near me, with me.

I think of God as being my Father. That comes naturally to me. So I need to pay attention so that I don't somehow forget that God is also Holy and that I need to be on my knees before Him.

Actually the Apostle's Creed is helpful in this as it talks about God as 'Father Almighty' - 'Father' pointing to the closeness of God, 'Almighty' indicating God's otherness.

But more importantly, scripture gives us ample evidence of the need to envision God as Mighty - as being above and beyond.

Take this, for example, from the prophet Isaiah:

'The Lord says, For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.'

Or how about this from the letter to the Romans:

‘O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!’

And of course the Church’s hymnody echoes this:

‘Holy, holy, holy!

Though the darkness hide thee Though the eye of sinful man

Thy glory may not see

Only Thou art holy

There is none beside Thee

Perfect in power, in love and purity

So friends, the big picture is that God is above us and with us, transcendent and eminent.

And the benefits of our faith are lessened, if we pay attention to only the one and not the other.

Right now in the midst of the awfulness of this pandemic and as Elaine and I steer a course through family bereavement. There's great comfort in knowing that God is with us.

In God we find strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow. Sometimes in our seeking after God.

It's good to know that he's kneeling at our feet to comfort us more than just enthroned on high above us.

I suppose it's like me being glad that I've been here at home with Elaine at this time. If I'd been away, removed from her, of course we could have spoken on the phone, but it wouldn't have been the same.

Sometimes you need to be near. And in God we have that. He promises to be near, as near as the air we breathe. But we know too that God is Almighty and that our God reigns. That God has the whole world in his hands. That God holds all time from beginning to end. And we are convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

That's because God is enthroned on high. Yes that's because God is Almighty, All-powerful, that God has no rival. And yes, that God alone is worthy of our praise and worship. With us and watching over us. We really do have the best of both worlds.

Amen. Thanks be to God.