

Scripture Readings for February 23 2020

2 Peter 1:16-21 (NIV)

¹⁶For we did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. ¹⁷He received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” ¹⁸We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.

¹⁹We also have the prophetic message as something completely reliable, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. ²⁰Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation of things. ²¹For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

Matthew 17:1-9 (NIV)

¹⁷After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. ²There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. ³Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.

⁴Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” ⁵While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!”

⁶When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. ⁷But Jesus came and touched them. “Get up,” he said. “Don’t be afraid.” ⁸When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.

⁹As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, “Don’t tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

Sermon: Jesus as Messianic King

There is a very popular and prominent view in the West today that “God,” if there is a god, is a very long way away and takes no notice of us or, for that matter, of anything in the cosmos. God had nothing to do with making the world and has nothing to do with maintaining it.¹ The world does what it does under its own steam. It develops and changes in random ways without outside interference as atoms move and collide with each other to produce new effects. That’s all there is to life.² And when we die, we die, and consequently, from this perspective, there is no afterlife to be afraid of *or* look forward to. This means is that we should make our lives as comfortable and as pleasurable for ourselves as possible. Religion is therefore a human invention designed to keep the masses docile.³ Since any possible divine being is completely out of reach, we are free to acknowledge a deity if we like, we might think that this being is genuinely Supreme if we wish,⁴ but we shouldn’t imagine that prayer or devotion will have any effect other than perhaps being beneficial to ourselves. The effect of all this is that *everything* that happens does so *without* God: politics, science, economics, history, the future are all *without God*.⁵ You might think that I’m talking about atheism. But in fact, I’m talking about a much older philosophy than that, namely Epicureanism, after the 3rd century BC Greek philosopher, Epicurus (341-270 BC).

The reason that I mentioned all this is because it’s thought that the writer of 2 Peter was addressing the Church in the face of external critics with that Epicurean outlook and so it remains a relevant letter for today. The opponents present two charges; first, Jesus’ “second coming” is a false and deceitful tale⁶ and, second, prophecy (or Scripture) is unreliable.⁷ We will start with the first one, Christ’s “coming.” The Greek word for “coming” or “presence” here is *parousia* [“par rou see a”] and means “a visit to a city by a deity, a conquering ruler, or an important person who comes to give rewards to his allies and to mete out judgement to his opponents.”⁸ The apostles had taught that Messiah Jesus would return in glory, “to judge the living and the dead,” as we say in the Creed.⁹ Later, in 2 Peter 3 we read “in the(se) last days scoffers will come . . . saying, “Where is this promised coming of Jesus? For ever since our fathers died, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation!”¹⁰ This letter is therefore thought to have been written around the end of the 1st century AD when doubts were beginning to creep in because it seems that the early Christians expected Christ would come again “in

¹ Matter is deemed eternal. Epicureanism is influenced by Democritus’ atomism (5th century BC) and was a *minority* view in 1st century AD. Plato and Stoicism were more influential.

² It is therefore meaningless in this worldview to save there is “evil,” the world is what it is.

³ See NT Wright, “*History and Eschatology*” (SPCK, 2019), 8,12,21-23.

⁴ You have no idea whether there is just one god or many!

⁵ This spirit is encapsulated in William Ernest Hendry’s poem *Invictus* (1875) which famously ends, “I am the master of my fate, the captain of my soul.” See: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/51642/invictus> .

⁶ That is the contextual meaning of “a clever myth” (or “story” - see 2 Pet 1:16).

⁷ 2 Pet 1:16-21 (see also 2:1-3). The so-called “second coming” is simply “coming” or “presence” (Greek – *parousia*).

⁸ Citizens would therefore leave the city to honour the coming “king” and escort him on his final stages into the city. (See 1 Thess 4:17 alludes to this tradition, and should not be interpreted literally!)

⁹ See also Matt 24-25; Mark 13; Luke 21; 1 Thess 1:10; 5:1 – 11; 1 Pet 4:5; 2 Tim 4:1.

¹⁰ 2 Pet 3:3-4. (The reference to “fathers” or “ancestors” could refer to first-generation Christians or Old Testament fathers.)

glory” relatively quickly after his ascension.¹¹ The apparent delay resulted in a sense of disappointment and anxiety.¹² We hear the same criticism today, “It’s been 2000 years since Jesus walked the earth, and you Christians are claiming that he’s still going to come back? Where is he? And why is he taking so long? You’re all talking nonsense,” they say, “the world simply runs along in the way it always has done.” Moreover, the Epicureans saw this “story” as cunning and deceitful because they thought it was foolishness to fear God or to seek his approval.¹³ For them, this world is all there is and, consequently, the idea that a disinterested heavenly being would cross that great gulf, as the Messiah’s return implies, was seen as a ridiculous fabrication. Furthermore, because they believed in the *finality* of death, the idea of Jesus “returning” was ludicrous.

What does the writer do to say *to the Church* in response to this mocking? He reminds them that Peter, James, and John were *witnesses* to the transfiguration of Jesus,¹⁴ and this was considered a strong refutation.¹⁵ As we heard earlier, the writer states clearly, “For we did *not* follow cleverly concocted fables when we made known to you the power and return of our Lord Jesus Christ; no, we were *eyewitnesses* of his grandeur. For he received honor and glory from God the Father, when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory¹⁶: “This is my dear Son, in whom I am delighted.”¹⁸ When this voice was conveyed from heaven, *we ourselves heard it, for we were with him* on the holy mountain.¹⁷ This is a powerful reminder to Christians that Jesus is *deeply historical*,¹⁸ he is *not* a fabrication. Nevertheless, the example that the writer chooses is that strange moment of transfiguration. We have to pause for a moment and ask, “Why choose that *particular* moment?” Why not some dramatic earthly miracle of Jesus instead? The answer lies in the significance of the transfiguration in the life of the early church.¹⁹

In the gospel accounts of the Transfiguration we get a glimpse of the true *identity* of Jesus as *Messiah* and coming *King*,²⁰ even if the path for ultimate glory would be one of suffering and the cross. The divine words that the three disciples *heard* allude to Psalm 2, a coronation liturgy in which God proclaims, “I have installed my *king* on Zion, my holy mountain.” And the king replies, “I will proclaim

¹¹ See also Matt 16:28; Mark 9:1; Luke 9:27. Does this refer to the resurrection or the *parousia*?

¹² See also Mal 2:17; Ps 42:3; 79:10, and Jer 17:15 for similar mocking criticism. For various good reasons, 2 Peter is not thought to have been written by Peter himself but by one of his followers. (Note too that Paul’s letters are mentioned in 3:15, indicating they were in circulation.)

¹³ Lucretius (a key advocate of Epicurus) argued that tales of punishment in hell and rewards in paradise merely reflect the anxieties and desires the weak-minded in this life. Epicureans considered the doctrines of divine providence and final judgement to be despicable stories devised for social control. (Marx would agree.)

¹⁴ See: Matt 17:1–8, Mark 9:2–8, Luke 9:28–36. The Greek for “transfiguration” is the same root as *metamorphosis*. See also: <https://securereservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Jesus-Transformed.pdf> .

¹⁵ See 1 Cor 15:3–8; 1 John 1:1–3; John 1:14 for similar eyewitness comments.

¹⁶ See also Heb 1:3; 8:1; Deut 33:26, John 1:14 for similar language on “glory.”

¹⁷ 1 Pet 1:16-18 (NET).

¹⁸ We need both the “Christ of faith” *and* the “Jesus of history”; *history* matters!

¹⁹ The writer is addressing the church, *not* the Epicureans - who would have dismissed both the miraculous and the historicity of the Transfiguration. Modern Epicureans (inside and outside the Church) do the same today.

²⁰ And not merely a further element of Jesus being a Moses-like leader (see Matt 17:1-9; Exod 34:28-35).

the LORD's decree: He said to me, "You are my son; today I have become your father."²¹ Don't forget your history, says the writer of 2 Peter, *Jesus the King is coming* because *God himself* has revealed that information to *three* reliable witnesses. We therefore have historical grounds for our *faith*, that Jesus is God's Messiah who lived, died, and rose again, and is the One who is to come.²² Indeed, it is only *by faith* that Christians see that the human Jesus as *not* merely human. Moreover, we must never be limited by the rules of human knowledge – particularly if we consider how little philosophers and scientists know about the cosmos! Let's not forget that fact when we hear all sorts of conflicting voices today. This firm anchor is a true today as it was for the readers of 2 Peter.

The second criticism is that prophecy (or Scripture) is unreliable. Of course that's what the Epicureans *would* say because they don't believe that the gods are interested in the affairs of the world. Consequently, *all* prophetic oracles *must* be fake - regardless of the personal integrity of the one who is prophesying. Now the writer of 2 Peter would certainly want to differentiate between false and true prophets, and goes on to do precisely that.²³ But his key point here to the Church is that no scriptural "prophecy" is a matter of the prophet's own interpretation,²⁴ because true prophecy doesn't arise by human impulse, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit who speaks from God. We therefore *do* have authentic prophetic words, including those within the scriptures,²⁵ that *are* altogether reliable.²⁶

As we digest that argument for a moment, we must remember that the Bible contains a remarkably wide range of material, from poetry and history to prophetic writings and strange symbolic revelations. But behind the different genres and different authors is, we believe, *divine inspiration* that does not bypass human minds, personalities, and their specific historical situations, but works through them to breathe God's words through human words. It is important to note that it is the *community of faith* that together determines or recognises that God has spoken through their sacred texts and verbal oracles. If you are *not* therefore a part of that community, you will not find such texts to be inspired or to have authority. Precisely *how* we understand and interpret the Bible is a non-trivial matter, but it also involves serious and critical studies not just of the text itself but of its context, and that involves knowledge of linguistics, archeology, cultural and religious history, theology, etc. Even so, we are confident that the same Holy Spirit who inspired the original authors will reveal divine truths to the broad community of the faithful in every generation. That is why the writer of 2 Peter is encouraging his readers to have confidence in what their critics are despising. He concludes: "You will do well to be attentive to the scriptures as it is a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning

²¹ Ps 2:6-7. While an ode in the coronation a King, the psalm came to be seen as messianic to Jews.

²² See also 2 Pet 3:13.

²³ See 2 Pet 2:1-3; 3:1-2. Not all things that are claimed to be prophetic *are* truly prophetic, nevertheless, we must not simply reject prophecy *en masse*.

²⁴ Human prophets did not *originate* the message, but they did *convey* it, using their own personalities in the process.

²⁵ To what scriptures is he referring? In general, this means the *Old Testament*, although no specific text is mentioned.

²⁶ 2 Pet 1:20-21,19 (NET, NRSV). Prophecy is therefore reliable in the Scriptures and given orally, if authentically under the Spirit's guidance.

star rises.²⁷” Incidentally, the reference to the “morning star” is not only messianic²⁸ but also a physical reminder that when you see that bright “star” near the horizon just before the dawn, though it is in fact the planet Venus, it is a *sure* sign the sun is coming. In other words, wait in confidence, for when Christ returns, the full revelation of God will be revealed.

When we are faced with doubts or despair in our journeys of faith, we too need to reflect back to memorable moments in our lives where there was vivid clarity or perspective. Our present crisis may be due to terrible personal circumstances or, more generally, due to a crippling fear that is fuelled by growing public problems that threaten the very fabric of society and even the life of our planet. The combination of climate change, plastic waste, super-viruses, wars, ethnic violence, crime, poverty, economic uncertainty, and a host of other pervasive problems can be depressingly overwhelming. I should add here that Epicureans had *no* grounds for optimism or progress, and I believe the same is true today for those who exclude God from the future. In our times of darkness and doubt, we can, then, take some encouragement from our earlier experiences of God. In the scriptures, such special moments were often associated with mountain tops, whether that be for Moses, Elijah, or Jesus, and the author of 2 Peter identifies the transfiguration as one such brief-but-profound epiphany. Our own brief “*aha*” moments may also have been mystical, even confusing, but at that point in time we were somehow convinced that God was *real* and was with us. And like the Transfiguration of Jesus, we probably can’t clearly articulate *precisely* what we experienced in a way that would convince a good friend, let alone a skeptic. But that is OK because we acknowledge such fleeting moments through *the eyes of faith* and our brains – and our friends - will try and convince us otherwise. Like those disciples, we must hold on to those moments of insight as we come down from the mountain into the murky confusion of everyday life.²⁹ The thing about such experiences, which we naturally wish were more frequent, is that they come when we don’t expect them. That’s because they are moments of grace and fuel for the road.

Let me relate a personal example. As Presbyterians we teach Holy Communion is a sacrament³⁰ and that Christ’s presence can be experienced in a mystical way, that is nevertheless acutely real, during Communion. It’s a faith position; we can’t prove it. On one such occasion while at University Community Church, after returning to my pew having just received the bread and wine (by intinction), I acknowledged in quiet prayer that the same power that had *raised Jesus from the dead* was now mystically *embodied* within me. The risen Christ was not just *with* us, but *in* us. It is a formidable thought. At that moment, I suddenly felt warm, as if I had been wrapped in a hot blanket. I interpret this as a sign that the Holy Spirit was pouring healing, hope, courage, and peace into the core of my being. You may find this description weird and emotional; others of you will recognize it for what it is:

²⁷ 2 Pet 1:19. The (confusing) phrase “in your hearts” is omitted here for clarity.

²⁸ See Num 24:17 (and Matt 2:2; Rev 2:28; 22:16; Rom 13:12; 2 Pet 3:18).

²⁹ Remember how the disciples had little faith (and entered a crisis situation) when they came down the mount of Transfiguration! Matt 17:14-20; Mark 9:14-29; Luke 9:37-43.

³⁰ The Latin word “sacrament” is a translation of the Greek word for “mystery”; a visible sign of an invisible grace.

a gracious anointing. This special moment didn't last long; in my experience such occasions never do. At that time, my wife, Anne, was seriously ill with cancer. Although God *may* have been doing some physical healing in Anne at that moment, I did *not claim* this experience as a sign of miraculous activity. It was, for me, a quiet but vivid reassurance of God's presence in our situation, and perhaps I needed such confirmation at that time. I trust you have similar "aha" moments of your own.

In conclusion, I can't help but wonder if C S Lewis was inspired by the transfiguration accounts, or by the words of 2 Peter, when he wrote these words of Aslan, the Lion of Narnia to a hesitant follower: "Here on the mountain I have spoken to you clearly. I will not often do so down in Narnia. Here on the mountain, the air is clear and your mind is clear; as you drop down into Narnia, the air will thicken. Take great care that it does not confuse your mind. All the signs that you have learned here will not look at all as you expect them to look, when you meet them there. That is why it's important to know them by heart and pay no attention to appearance. *Remember* the signs and *believe* the signs. Nothing else matters."³¹ Amen. Let us pray.

³¹ C S Lewis, *The Silver Chair*, HarperCollins 1981, 27