



## The Parish Churches of S Philip and S Augustine and S Matthew with S Mary the Virgin Newcastle

### Homily for the Feast of the Transfiguration (6<sup>th</sup> August) 2026

The three Apostles' encounter with Christ's transfigured glory took place atop a mountain. It is a detail, which is shared with a number of key moments in the narrative of Christ's incarnate Life: among them the Ascension and, of course, the green hill far away without a city wall. This, in turn draws on a trope inherited from Old Testament times: so, for example, the delivery of the Ten Commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai and the location of the Temple on Mount Zion. In the days before the City of David achieved its exclusive pre-eminence the multiple temples of Israel were often called the *high places*.

The notion that when humans wished to draw close to their god, they would ascend to a height was not confined to the Judeo-Christian tradition: the ziggurats of the Ancient Near East and the pyramids of South America draw on a similar perspective. Lying behind this approach was the conviction that the divine was located in the skies, which we still metaphorically term the heavens.

Today, our conception of the divine Presence is more sophisticated. In part, we owe this to scientific advance and space exploration, which has not discovered a celestial throne-room in the skies. However, we should not be cowed into supposing that our changing perspectives are simply a retreat in the face of scientific assault.

The seeds of our present appreciation of the nature of Heaven are present in the texts of the New Testament and its presentation of what is called in the jargon, *proleptic eschatology*. This term, which sounds like something for which one needs an operation, refers to the phenomenon first outlined by Saint Paul, that the Kingdom of Heaven is already present to some extent in human history and the lives of Christians as they achieve faithfulness in their discipleship.

Moreover, we have Jesus' insistence that simply journeying to a particular place or venue does not, of itself, constitute a drawing close to God. This is accomplished, rather, by an interior disposition, which, in turn, manifests itself in the character of our lives: "Lift up your hearts," we say as we embark on the great anaphoral prayer, during which the risen Christ will become intensely present in our midst.

To be sure, the architectural styles of centuries have drawn on the symbolism of physically ascending to meet with our God, as we place altars at the top of a set of steps; but simply moving to the high places of our religious culture does not bring us closer to our God.

This is not to disparage the place of shrines and sanctuaries; but it does remind us that these are merely aids in the challenge of lifting up our hearts as we seek to approach the divine: for some, perhaps, the experience of encountering some awe-inspiring location helps us to lift up our hearts as we seek our God.

None-the-less, the Presence of God is not confined to such places; and, as the narrative of the Transfiguration implies, if we try to constrain His Presence to such contexts, we shall fail. As the Gospel record makes plain, the divine Presence is to be found just as much in the grubby realities of daily life as in the rarefied realms of religious edifices. The challenge for us is to recognise the Jesus we have met in the high places when we walk past Him in the street.