

The Transfiguration of Jesus – Matthew 17:1-13

Introduction

Back in 2002, I had only just started working at a church and knew very little about it. I had not been to college, and had no formal training, and I really struggled. After only a few weeks, I thought I would give up ministry, go back to my trade, and my home church, and look after a Bible Study group. I felt like I at least knew how to do those things. At the end of first term that year, Vanessa and I went on a week's holiday to try and refresh. On the holiday, we went to an Anglican church in a small country town and heard the visiting Archdeacon preach. He got up, without any notes, and said, "Well, what will I talk about today?" and then spent 10 minutes talking about nothing and making no point. He was just using up the 10 minutes of time set aside for a sermon. He spoke about some of the things he did that week, people he had visited, his thoughts on a couple of items on the 6pm news, and then told us we were going to sing a hymn. He may have made one reference to the Bible in passing, but there was no lesson from the Bible, and not one word about Jesus or the salvation he offers us. It was the worst sermon I had ever heard in my life. It was like he was not even trying. As we were walking back to the place we were staying, Vanessa said, "You have got to go to college! You're better than this guy and he's an Archdeacon! If nothing else, we should come back here and give these people the gospel that was not preached to them today." Every now and then, when I am lacking in confidence, I think back to that day. I might be your average minister, who just takes one day at a time, but God has shown me the good news of Jesus as presented in the Bible, and I have been given the privilege of telling people that good news. So, that is what I try to do each Sunday, and I will continue doing that. Sometimes, when you are lacking confidence, when you are feeling unsure, you might be able to look back at a time or an event which might remind you to keep going, to have hope, to not give up, despite what is going on around you. Vanessa's words after that church service have sometimes done that for me, and I think the Transfiguration of Jesus did that for Peter.

Context

The context of this story is critical in understanding what the Transfiguration of Jesus was all about. In chapter 16, we saw that Peter was able to declare that Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ, the Promised King of God's Kingdom. But Peter thought that Jesus was here to lead a revolution, to overthrow Rome, and to restart an earthly Kingdom of God. But Peter was wrong and Jesus told him that he (i.e. Jesus) would suffer and be killed. Jesus then told the disciples how they also needed to be prepared to suffer and die. They were supposed to give up everything in this world because they were living for an eternal kingdom, a heavenly kingdom, not an earthly one. I imagine this was a lot for them to take in, and they could not understand what they would be facing as they had not faced it yet. But they would face suffering and persecution. So, how was someone like Peter supposed to get through those times of suffering when they eventually came? How would he cope when people refused to believe that Jesus is God's Son, the second person of the Trinity? What events would he turn to for encouragement when doubts and fears would arise? If it was me, I think I would always

be turning to the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. But not Peter, he also turned to the transfiguration of Jesus. Have a look at what Peter wrote in one of his letters.

2 Peter 1:16-18 *For 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. ¹⁷ He 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." ¹⁸ We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.*

Something happened that day on that sacred mountain. Something that stuck in Peter's mind. He did not forget that day, and it was the Transfiguration of Jesus that reminded him that he was a follower of the glorious and majestic Lord Jesus.

The Transfiguration

On this special day, Jesus only took with him Peter, James, and John. Three fishermen who were Jesus' key disciples. Yes, Jesus did have twelve disciples, and there were others who also followed Jesus the whole time of his ministry. But these three were the ones closest to Jesus. The four of them walked up the mountain on their own. Peter, James, and John were not expecting to see anybody else. Luke tells us in his version of the story that they were going up the mountain to pray. Jesus liked to do this. He liked going up a mountain, or to a garden, to a solitary place where he would not be interrupted by the crowds, and he would pray. Suddenly, for no apparent reason, Jesus was transfigured before them. But what does Matthew mean when he says that Jesus was transfigured? Interestingly, this story comes up in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. And while they are all obviously describing the same changes in Jesus, they use different examples to try and explain the unexplainable. They talk about his face changing. Matthew tells us that Jesus' face shone like the sun. It was dazzling bright! But it was more than just his face that shone, even his clothes had the glare of the brightness of Jesus coming through them. Matthew tells us that Jesus' clothes became as white as light. Mark says that they were whiter than anyone could bleach them, and Luke says that they were as bright as a flash of lightning. It seems to me that Jesus was blindingly white and what the disciples really needed was a set of welding goggles to dim the glare of flashing white light of Jesus.

Those Shining Beings

Now, there are other times in the Bible when beings shine with glory, purity, and power. The angel, who frightened the guards, rolled back the stone of Jesus' tomb, and waited for the women to come had an appearance like lightning and his clothes were as white as snow. When Paul met the resurrected and glorified Jesus on the road to Damascus, he was blinded because the vision of Jesus was so bright. In Daniel's vision of God's throne room, we read about God being on the throne. His clothing was as white as snow and the hair on his head was white like wool. Even his throne was flaming with fire and its wheels were all ablaze. But his hair was not white because he was old, his hair and clothes were dazzling white because that demonstrated the glory of God. What we see in these visions are God and his angels pictured as being supernatural, pure, holy, and unbelievably powerful. The Transfiguration of Jesus showed the disciples that Jesus was more than just a man. There was something supernatural about him. Jesus was God in the flesh of a man.

But there is one other story that I am reminded of, the story of Moses coming down the holy mountain after meeting with God. When he brought down the Ten Commandments his face was shining, it was radiant, because he had been with God. It seems that God's glory was being reflected in Moses' face. What is interesting in Jesus' Transfiguration is that Jesus was the dazzlingly bright one. It was not Moses, it was not Elijah, it was Jesus! Jesus shone brighter than Moses ever did. His radiance was the radiance of God for he is God! The whole point of this vision was for Peter to see that Jesus was more than just an extraordinary man. Jesus was more than just a human messiah who might lead an earthly kingdom. Jesus was greater than Moses, greater than Elijah, Jesus was God who had come to lead his Heavenly Kingdom. I think that is what Peter remembered when he looked back at that event all those years later, when he was writing his second letter. He knew who Jesus was, because he had seen the glory of Jesus on that mountain.

Stay, Just a Little Bit Longer.

Well, let us return to Moses and Elijah. We are not told how the disciples worked out that the other two men were Moses and Elijah. Maybe Jesus spoke to them by name and the disciples overheard those names, or maybe Jesus introduced them to the disciples. "Peter, James and John, say 'hello' to Moses and Elijah." It all seems very strange and we are not given enough detail, but then...

Matthew 17:4 Peter 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."

It is hard to know exactly what Peter was thinking. Mark and Luke say that Peter did not know what to say and that he was frightened, so this just popped out of his mouth. But I think that Peter realised that this was a special moment and he did not want this moment to end. Have ever felt like that, like you do not want that special moment to disappear? You want to capture it, you want to keep it, you do not want to let it go. When I was a child, they would have called that a Kodak moment. Today, the young people would have whipped out their phone and taken a video. Peter decided that he would build them shelters to make them comfortable which might encourage Moses and Elijah to stay. I mean, this is like the "dream-team". Moses and Elijah, two of Israel's greatest prophets and heroes of the faith could join up with Jesus and help lead the revolution. With Moses and Elijah on their side, they could not lose! I think that is why Peter wanted to build those shelters. To keep those "great ones" around.

Listen to Him

Again, it is interesting that Jesus did not rebuke Peter here, especially when you think of how Jesus rebuked Peter in the previous chapter – "Get behind me, Satan" (Matthew 16:23). So, while I do not think that Peter has understood what was happening yet, Jesus allowed the event to play out, and it ended up being God, the Father, who put Peter back in his place.

We are told that while Peter was still speaking about building some shelters, a bright cloud came and covered them. Now, you could say that it must have been foggy on the mountain that day, but I think this is supposed to remind us of a couple of things. Firstly, there were times when Moses met with God and God came to Moses in a thick cloud. Now, here was Moses and Elijah meeting with Jesus in a bright cloud. Then

there is the vision of Daniel, where the Son of Man entered into the throne room of God, coming with the clouds of heaven. Here was Jesus, the Son of Man, meeting with Moses and Elijah in a cloud from heaven. And that was when God spoke...

Matthew 17:5 While he [Peter] 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!"

God was not speaking to Moses or Elijah, God was not speaking to Jesus, God was speaking to Peter, James, and John. Everything that happened that day pointed to Jesus being more than just an extraordinary man. Everything that happened that day pointed to Jesus being God in the flesh. Jesus was the one who was transfigured, shining brightly like the sun, not Moses or Elijah. Jesus was the bright one, shining in the cloud of heaven as he talked with Moses and Elijah. And God told the disciples that Jesus was his Son and that they were to listen to him. As great as Moses and Elijah were, the disciples did not need them, they had Jesus. Moses represented the Old Covenant agreement God had made with his people, Jesus represented something new. Moses and Elijah represented the Old Testament Scriptures which spoke with all the authority of God, now they were told to listen to Jesus. As great as Moses and Elijah were, Jesus was far greater, and so would be the Kingdom he would bring.

The whole point of this story is so that Peter, James, and John could know that Jesus is the powerful, glorified, Son of God, which they needed to listen to. This was a turning point in the history of God's people. No longer would Moses and the prophets be the primary place to hear from God and to understand the salvation he offers. God's people would now turn to Jesus. Jesus, God in the flesh of a human being, was among them. The King of God's Kingdom had come to establish God's eternal Kingdom. The disciples needed to listen to him.

Turn to Jesus

Maybe you have had an experience which helped to cement your faith. Maybe God has convicted you of your belief. Maybe God gave you a sense of peace at some time in your life. Some of us have had spiritual experiences which have spoken into our lives. Sometimes, it is good to look back at those experiences and thank God that he has given them to us. Those personal experiences can be things that God sometimes uses in our lives. Of course, not everyone has had experiences like Peter did. And if you have not had experiences, that is okay, it does not mean that you are not a child of God. And we must always remember that those experiences must sit under the authority of God's Word. If your experiences take you in a different direction to what the Jesus of the Bible would take you, then you must set aside those experiences and trust in what Jesus says to you in his Scriptures. For, like Peter, we need to listen to Jesus – the Jesus of the Bible. So, please get to know Jesus, listen to Jesus as you read the Bible. And if you need help in knowing how to do that, then we are here to help you. But no matter what, we all can be assured that Jesus is the glorified, pure, and holy King of God's eternal kingdom and you are invited to be a part of that Kingdom.