

## **Sermon**

Exodus 24: 12-18; Matthew 17: 1-9; 2 Peter 1: 16-21

So, just when you thought that you had finished with one mountain you find yourself on another mountain. One minute you are learning about the world from what Jesus had to say and the next you are learning about Jesus from what God has to say. In other words, in the space of a short time we have moved from the Sermon on the Mount to the Mount of the Transfiguration. During the previous two weeks, during our worship, we have had readings from the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus gathers his disciples around him for the purposes of teaching. This week Jesus marks out three of those disciples – Peter, James and John – taking them away from the others for a special, mountain-top experience.

Two weeks ago we heard Jesus' teaching from Matthew chapter five about how Christians respond with restraint to abuse – turning the other cheek – and how our love and prayer must extend even to our enemies; and that we must be like that because that is how God is in the face of human abuse and a determination to be God's enemies rather than God's friends. Last week, in Matthew chapter six, Jesus' teaching about life priorities places serving God before attachment to material possessions – you can not serve both God and Money (Mammon) – but recognising God's gracious provision for birds of the air and flowers of the field, we seek God's kingdom and God's righteousness as our first priorities, leaving the worries about tomorrow to take care of themselves.

This week, along with Peter, James and John, we are learning that Jesus, the outstanding Teacher, is not **just** a good teacher, as the popular verdict of our times might suggest, but is God's Son, carrying all the authority of God for what we do with our lives; the closest human analogy in Jesus' time perhaps being the authority that a **Lord** would have in the lives of servants and slaves. When Jesus concluded his Sermon on the Mount he descended, along with all his disciples into the hurley-burley of everyday life and need, being approached to heal those who were unwell. On this occasion when he descends from the mountain it will be to begin the journey towards Jerusalem and the cross; his suffering, death and then resurrection; our reconciliation with God and prospect of eternal life. That's why this reading comes at this part of the year, before the period known as Lent. Before we set out on our version of that journey, however, the one that comes to a climax at Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Day, we need to take a moment to consider what these events, this Transfiguration of Jesus before the eyes of his most trusted disciples, means for us today.

Let's begin by reminding ourselves what happened. "After six days", which in the way Matthew tells it seems to be six days after Peter has declared his belief that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, and Jesus has responded by speaking of his coming suffering and death, Jesus takes a group of three disciples up "a high mountain by themselves". There, he is transfigured before them, both in terms of his face – shining like the sun – and his clothing – white as the light. Moses and Elijah, the great representative figures of freedom, law and prophecy are seen

conversing with Jesus. Peter does not really know how to respond, suggesting commemorative shelters for Moses, Elijah and Jesus; perhaps implying that even at this stage he sees the other two as on a par with Jesus and at this point comes the cloud that envelopes them and the voice which instructs them: “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!” The fear of the disciples makes them fling themselves to the ground, face down, presumably thus missing the departure of Moses and Elijah because when Jesus comes to them with a reassuring touch and the command to “get up” they see only him. **Unlike** ourselves, the disciples at this point are put under a discipline **not** to speak of this episode, but only until after Jesus’ resurrection, though you have to wonder to what extent they could have understood that was implied by that.

What an amazing story. It certainly connects with other biblical stories. It seems impossible to hear this account from Matthew’s Gospel and not hear echoes from the story about the time Moses, accompanied by Joshua, was summoned up the mountain by the Lord in order to receive the law and the commandments; an occasion when that mountain was also enveloped in a cloud associated with a special presence of the Lord. Also, the voice of God: “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!” is a closer echo, indeed a repetition of the Lord’s voice at the Jordan River when Jesus was baptised. So, what was true as Jesus was setting out on his earthly ministry still holds true at this point in the Gospel, when he setting out on the journey which will bring that ministry to a conclusion at Calvary.

Not only does this occasion look back to others in the Bible, there is even a scripture passage that looks back to it. As I said before, this is an amazing story but I don't mean by that that it is unreal; a fiction. True, such things are not part of our everyday experience but that does not mean that we should dismiss them as fantasy. This was not part of the everyday experience of Peter, James and John either, as their response of terror demonstrates. And then there is that passage from the second letter of Peter; words that I find to have a haunting quality; the haunting quality of someone looking back across the years and remembering, re-experiencing a shocking encounter with God, when the cloud descends, when the 'curtain' which obscures the divine from the human is removed: "We do not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eye-witnesses of his majesty ... We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain." (1: 16, 18)

Now, this **is** a stunning visual experience for the disciples but it also involves the other senses of feeling and hearing; it involves touching and speaking and this has its impact on all of Jesus' disciples today. At the moment when they see Jesus transfigured, at the moment when they see him in conversation with Moses and Elijah; at that moment the cloud envelopes them and they hear the voice, the voice of God their response is one of terror. Nothing at all surprising that that should happen in a time when there was a widespread and lively

understanding of the existence and essential role of God (or at least of the gods). Even in our time, one that has tried to put God and the things of God to the far periphery of human existence there is still a measure of fear where God is concerned.

Sometimes this comes from human life experiences. On a personal level we experience difficulties or we feel with our loved ones when they do so: illness, relationship breakdown, untimely death, physical, emotional and sexual abuse, bullying in the workplace or the playground and we are afraid. Either God is permitting this to happen, perhaps even bringing it about, or God is ignorant of what is happening or incapable of preventing it. In either case we would have much to fear. Then, ultimately, of course, there is the question of death; a question that concerns us all both directly and indirectly; and many of us, both as a congregation and as individuals have been affected in recent days by the death of those who were close to us. Whatever we believe about what God can or will do on earth we are united in the belief that it is God who deals with us and our loved ones when we die. I have been privileged in recent weeks to be part of funeral services for two different people, one here in Ingatestone and one in Billericay, where individuals concerned have died confident in what awaits them, because of the strong Christian convictions that underpinned their approach to life. In some cases, however, funerals where I am involved do not have that strong hope for my observation is that people do not want to think too deeply about the ultimate fate of the departed, at least in part because to do that

would be to confront their own situation. For them, for God to intervene in their lives is indeed a frightful prospect.

And this is so sad because, understandable though this fear is, there is no need for it. Peter, James and John, experience the voice of God and are terror struck, but this experience is momentary because at that moment God, in his beloved Son, Jesus, touches them: “They fell down to the ground terrified. But Jesus came and touched them.” Not only does God touch them but God speaks to them once again, this time through his beloved Son and the message is, “Don’t be afraid”. And this then, if you like leads to the **other** transfiguration that occurs on the mountain; a transfiguration that is yours and mine to experienced: the transfiguration, not of Jesus, but of the disciples; those representatives of other disciples, both then and now; Peter, James and John. They arrive at the mountain not knowing why they are there and not knowing how to respond to the vision before them of Jesus in the company of Moses and Elijah. When God speaks they are terrified and who can blame them, but when Jesus touches them and speaks to them they in turn are transfigured.

They are changed from those who have flung themselves to the ground in terror in God’s presence to those who get up and continue in the company of his beloved Son, Jesus. They have been enveloped in a cloud but now, we are told, they can see, and what they see is Jesus. They began by being terrified of God but now find God is a God who shares their experience of life. On a mountain

top they encounter the God who, on another mountain, gave the law and the commandments to Moses; the God who is judge of right and wrong. They find this God anew, now, in Jesus, who pronounces “get up”, a phrase that on his lips goes together with the words “your sins are forgiven”. How wonderful it would be if everyone; everyone who has suffered in life or who has been weighed down by the sufferings of others would allow themselves to be helped up by Jesus. How wonderful it would be if everyone could put their trust in Jesus to help them to stand upright when they face God at the end.

How wonderful it **is** that this is exactly what God intends: “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!” How wonderful a thought to hold unto as, with Jesus and with other disciples of all times and all places we too get up and accompany him as he descends from the mountain and begins his journey to Jerusalem and to the salvation, the transfiguration(?) of the world; of all creation, including each one us in the process.