

Sermon for the Sunday next before Lent (26th February 2017)

Readings:

Exodus 24:12-18

2 Peter 1:16-21

Matthew 17:1-9

In the Bible, mountains are sometimes the places where people have an encounter with God. Our Old Testament reading is a part of what must be one of the more well-known accounts of this – when Moses went up the mountain and God gave him the tablets of stone with the commandments. The cloud, which we are told covered the mountain, is often another feature of an encounter with God – and so is the appearance of God’s glory – described here as being like a devouring fire- at least when viewed by the people of Israel waiting at the bottom and looking up. It didn’t devour Moses, however, who entered the cloud, stayed there for forty days and nights, and heard God speak.

Moses found he had a lot of listening to do. The next seven chapters tell us what God said, and at the end of the forty days and nights, Moses came down with it all on tablets of stone. But that’s another story.

Our story for today is in our Gospel reading – the account of the event we call “the Transfiguration”. You may like to have the Bible open at it – Matthew 17:1 on page 17 of the New Testament Section. It’s another account of an encounter with God. The same elements are there – the mountain, the cloud, and the glory of God, this time in the transfigured Jesus, his face shining and his clothes dazzling white, as well as the bright cloud. And, of course, God speaking.

The people who encountered God – who met with God – on this occasion were Peter, James and John – that little “inner core” group of disciples with whom Jesus shared some of his most important moments. For them it was a significant experience – as you’d expect – one that must have stayed with them for the rest of their lives. In our reading from Peter’s second letter we find him referring to it – we’ll come back to that in a moment. But why did Jesus, or perhaps we should say, God, choose this moment to give them this experience?

We need to understand something of the pattern of Jesus’ ministry. We need to know what is the “story so far.” So often we read little bits of it and don’t get much idea of the overall picture.

Jesus began, right at the beginning of all the Gospel stories, by going around teaching and healing, working other miracles and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom. His message was that God was acting. The miracles were one of the signs of that. Very early on, of course, he called the disciples, and they accompanied him as he went about, hearing what he had to say and witnessing the miracles. He even sent the disciples out at one point to teach and heal themselves.

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Then we come to a turning point. In Matthew's Gospel it comes in chapter 16, just before our reading for today. Matthew tells us it happened at a place called Caesarea Philippi, and often we use that name to refer to the whole incident – a very important incident in the Gospel story. There Jesus asked the disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" He's saying, in effect, "You've seen and heard everything – what do you make of it?"

Jesus asks, "Who do you say that I am?" And it's Peter who answers, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Something had actually struck home in what Jesus had been doing in all the time the disciples had been following him around. Jesus affirms Peter with the words, "Blessed are you...for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father in heaven." You'll find all that – and a lot more – in chapter 16, starting at verse 13.

But it's then, you see, that the difficult bit starts. The disciples had worked out that Jesus is the Messiah – but now Jesus had to tell them just what kind of Messiah he was going to be. No rising up and overthrowing the Romans, as many of the people, probably including the disciples, were expecting. Jesus was going to be a suffering Messiah who would die on a cross. So, Matthew tells us, it was from that time on that Jesus began to tell his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem, undergo great suffering and be killed – and then be raised from the dead. You'll find that in chapter 16, verse 21.

The disciples' reaction to that was disbelief and bewilderment. Peter offered a stern rebuke to Jesus – "God forbid – this must never happen to you." But Jesus turned on him with an even sterner rebuke – "Get behind me, Satan!" What a contrast to the affirming words Jesus had just addressed to him when Peter had said "You are the Messiah."

The disciples were going to need some help to get their minds and hearts round this new idea of what the Messiah would do. And, it seems, this is what the mysterious event we call the Transfiguration is all about.

I've already drawn attention to the similarities between this event and the time Moses received the commandments on the tablets of stone. The mountain, the cloud, the glory of God and, perhaps most important, God speaking – all were there. When Moses received the tablets it was perhaps the defining moment of the relationship between God and his people – God gave them the law, which laid down how that relationship was to be conducted. Perhaps in the same way, the Transfiguration symbolised the defining moment of the new relationship between God and humankind. The defining moment is not the Transfiguration in itself but the coming and the work of Jesus which it affirmed.

Whether the disciples understood this and made the connection with Moses at the time we can't tell – probably not. They were, after all, still somewhat bewildered and the Gospels seem to suggest that, even after this event, they had difficulty in understanding that Jesus was going to suffer and die. But even Peter's rather inane offer to build dwellings, or, perhaps, shrines, for Jesus, Moses and Elijah indicated he realised something special was

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going on – and the disciples falling to the ground at the sound of the voice from the cloud showed they realised they were in the presence of someone who inspired awe and fear. But the full significance of what happened probably sank into their minds and hearts gradually as time went on – perhaps after the events of Good Friday and Easter. Jesus ordered them, as they came down the mountain, not to speak about what had happened until after he was risen. That was probably good advice; at that stage they would most likely have garbled the story and confused themselves and others in the telling.

But what was it all about? Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus, signified that Jesus was in the true tradition of the Law and the Prophets. The bright cloud and Jesus' transfigured appearance signified God's glory – that God was present in majesty – and Jesus, being transfigured, shares in that glory, the majesty and divinity of God. And the voice from the cloud confirmed Jesus' true identity – "This is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased."

Those are virtually the same words with which the Father confirmed Jesus in his Sonship at his baptism – but this time there was a brief addition, the words, "Listen to him." The disciples needed to listen to what Jesus said – however difficult and strange it may be. This was the Father confirming that what Jesus said would happen – that he was to suffer and die – was in fact part of God's plan.

Our reading from the Second Letter of Peter confirms that the significance of it all did eventually sink in. There Peter – or whoever was writing in his name – scholars doubt if the apostle was the actual author – Peter writes, "...we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honour and glory from God the Father....saying 'This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased' We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven while we were with him on the holy mountain." That's 2 Peter 1:16-18 – you might like to turn to that if you have Bible – page 234.

Peter retells the essence of the story – it had obviously, by then, made a deep impression on him and he had come to appreciate it's significance. But it's well worth noticing why he tells it. It was because it was a real experience, not, as he puts it, some "cleverly devised myth." His teaching, when he "made known the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" was based on his own experiences, and the event we know as the Transfiguration was one of those – and a significant one at that, though no doubt his experience of meeting the risen Jesus was significant too!

And, if we are to make Jesus known – or, in Peter's words, "make known the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ", and indeed even if we are to know him ourselves, it needs to be on the basis of something that is real in our lives – not just a nice story, let alone some cleverly devised myth. We are not likely to have an experience like that of the disciples – but that doesn't mean we cannot have a deep and real relationship with Jesus out of which comes our own peace and joy and a desire to share that peace and joy with others. It takes faith – but it also takes commitment. Commitment to spending time letting that relationship grow. Time in prayer, time in reading God's word, time, perhaps, in study of some kind.

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Lent is the church's challenge each year to spend time in that way – a challenge to deepen our relationship with Jesus. Perhaps God is challenging you this Lent to make a commitment to pray more regularly, to read the Bible more, or to study, perhaps by reading our recommended Lent book. There may be other things you could do, such as going to a quiet day or retreat, as I hope to do next week. Maybe it's a bit late for you to organise that – but perhaps Lent is the time to seek something like that out to do later in the year.

Lent begins this Wednesday – Ash Wednesday. I wish you all a good Lent – not a time to give things up, though you can do that if you want, but a time to take things up – to make a commitment to grow nearer to Jesus.