

The Transfiguration of Jesus

If you are one of those whose favourite cake is a layer cake, I am sure you will be intrigued and probably enjoy our Bible passages this morning.

You might have noticed that all our readings this morning speak of mountains, clouds, and the presence of God. But like all geologists would attest, the deeper you dig the more you find. Our passages, especially the one from Matthew, is like this, the more we try to unpack it, the more we discover hidden layers.

This morning, time would not permit us to dig too deep into it. I would advise that you might want to read more about this.

Nevertheless, I would attempt to unwrap it just for us to have a glimpse of what we might discover when we do so.

To do this, we should consider this passage with the knowledge of what we have from the Old Testament passage.

In Exodus, Moses was commanded by God to come up to Him on the mountain top to receive the Tablets of Stone on which the Ten Commandments are now engraved. So, Moses takes with him Joshua, who will lead the Israelites after Moses. And the cloud covered the mountain.

A cloud – in the Bible is often a sign of God’s presence, and God calls to Moses out of the cloud. Then ‘the glory of the Lord’ (v.16) settles ‘like a devouring fire’ (v.17) on the mountain, and Moses remains there for forty days and nights, the traditional length of time taken for events of great religious significance to be accomplished.

With this in mind, a Jewish-Christian reading, Matthew’s account, would recognise the significance of the location and the events taking place.

By ascending a mountain to meet with God, Jesus’ encounter has parallels with Moses, who met with God on Mount Sinai. In fact, Moses himself is present in both narratives. Moreover, just as Moses was accompanied by his successor Joshua, so here Jesus brings with him Peter, James and John, who will be leaders of the Church after His death.

The glory of the Lord, that was ‘like a devouring fire’ – a destructive force – in the Old Testament reading, is now revealed, in the face and person of Jesus, as ‘like the sun’ (v.2) that gives life and light to every creature on earth.

The story of the Transfiguration has been studied and debated in theology and academic dissertations for ages. Many have focused on pinpointing the exact location of the mountain. Was it Tahor or

Hermon? Many have debated why the disciples were not transfigured themselves or why Jesus told His disciples not to tell anyone and why Peter wanted to build tents for three and not six? This morning, I will not try to answer these questions except probably the last two.

Do not tell anyone.

Jesus probably and please note, I said probably, because the Bible did not tell us so. Jesus told them not to tell anyone because He knew no one would believe them and they might be charged with blasphemy for claiming that they have seen Moses, Elijah and Jesus conversing together. Especially as this was seen by the Jews of the time as the sign that salvation has come. Please note that is just an assumption. We will never know for sure why. However, what we know for sure is that this event occurred as all the synoptic Gospels concurred on this.

Peter's tents.

For many of us present day Christians, we might find Peter's suggestion incomprehensible or even foolish or selfish? We need to bear in mind the historical context. Like many of his time, Peter had been taught by the Rabbis and the teachers of the law at the time

that the God who dwelt with Israel in the tents in the early days would do so again in the days of salvation. And the day of salvation will come only when Elijah reappears and here he was with Moses, Elijah and Jesus.

At this point, I suppose the question would be why was Jesus transfigured?

The purpose of the transfiguration of Christ was not for His sake, but rather for those of His disciples, so could have a greater perception of who Jesus was. The disciples, who had only known Him in His human body, now had a greater realization of the deity of Christ. The appearance of Moses and Elijah represented the Law and the Prophets, while Jesus represents the Messiah. The three foretold personalities that must be united for salvation of the people of Israel to occur.

The disciples never forgot what happened. In addition to Matthew, John wrote in his gospel,

“We have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only” (John 1:14).

Peter also wrote of it,

“We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were

eyewitnesses of His majesty. For He received honour 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.' We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with Him on the sacred mountain" (2 Peter 1:16-18).

Those who witnessed the transfiguration bore witness to it to the other disciples and to countless millions down through the centuries.

So back to my layer cake, having unwrapped it, what can we see?

Firstly, we need to understand that figuratively, our mountain of Transfiguration today is our church, or places where we have a form of spiritual bliss, our comfort zones, wherever these may . But if like Peter, *"we say it is good for us to be here, let just remain on this mountain and build tents, we are getting it wrong"*. God is not limited to those places alone. Hence our worship of Him and His majesty should not be limited to these places.

Secondly, Moses and Jesus did not go to the mountain top alone. They went with carefully selected people. Who do you take with you to where you encounter God?

The third lesson is that we need to come out of our comfort zones. As mysterious and marvellous as these experiences are, neither Moses nor Jesus can accomplish the task which God has given him until they descended from the mountain. Likewise, we must also leave this physical building to accomplish the task God has given us, which is to “go out and make disciples for him”.

Yesterday, as part of the its Vision Day, the PCC (church leadership team) and some members of the congregation met to pray, reflect and refine our thoughts on who we are as a church, what our priorities should be and the type of Rector we should be looking for to lead us into the future.

It was an encouraging day as we gave thanks for ministries such as Children and Youth Work, community work, our patterns of worship amongst many others. And also ministries that need further development such spiritual growth, and our small groups, our welcoming and inclusivity of new members, the development of a ministry to young adults, reaching those who are not familiar with the Christian faith, and making our worship patterns more diverse and accessible and encouraging and developing lay leadership and every member vocation.

These I hope you will agree are signs of a church that wants to share the love, the majesty and deity of Christ with everyone and I believe this is what we should be doing. In fact, this is what we are called to do.

Pope Francis, in a homily for World Youth Day (28 July 2013), wrote:

'There are no borders, no limits: [Jesus] sends us to everyone. The gospel is for everyone, not just for some. It is not only for those who seem closer to us, more receptive, more welcoming. It is for everyone. Do not be afraid to go and to bring Christ into every area of life, to the fringes of society, even to those who seem farthest away, most indifferent. The Lord seeks all – he wants everyone to feel the warmth of his mercy and his love.'

So today, my prayer is that we would not seek to build tents on this mountain, but rather go into the world and share the Good news of the Transfigured Christ. May we be blessed as we do so. Amen.