

Coming down the mountain Matt 17.9

Rev Reg Weeks 12 March 2017

Last communion, a month ago, I made the point that Matthew had a purpose in writing his gospel – in telling his story of Jesus ‘Sermon on the Mount he wasn’t just jotting down a collection of events and teachings, but was writing his gospel to convince, particularly Jewish readers, that Jesus was in fact their long looked-for Messiah. And as evidence of that, Jesus was recognised as a Rabbi who ‘spoke with authority’- a Rabbi with ‘shmika’. And at several places in his gospel Matthew makes clear allusions to aspects of Moses’ life and experience to underline that one greater than Moses was here.

One such place is our Gospel reading for this morning which gives Mathew’s take on an event recorded by all three synoptic gospels and commonly referred to as the Transfiguration.

But before we delve into the details I want to note that I was puzzled by the lectionary’s choice of an Old Testament reading to go with story.

Why did the compilers of the lectionary put the story of the Transfiguration along with the **Call of Abram**?

Well . . . after last week’s exploration of the Fall of humanity by John Howell, and the cataclysmic results of disobedience and division, this week, the Genesis account takes a significant turn with a word of hope and a promise of blessing – a promise of redemption, if you will. Through the obedience of this one man, called to leave home, family, culture, and a predictable though undistinguished future, God will bless “all the families of the earth”

Nothing in all of Salvation History can be achieved other than by a willing obedience to the call of God on individual lives, however that may be perceived. As the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews has said

“time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— ³³who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won

strength out of weakness, . . . and I would include Mary, and Peter, and James, and John, and of course, Jesus himself.

The blessing of God comes in response to willing obedience, and all of the participants in the Transfiguration story are there precisely because they have willingly obeyed the call of God on their lives – leaving the security of a predictable future to put their lives and their futures in God’s hands – and act of faithful surrender.

So, Peter James and John find themselves climbing a mountain at Jesus’ invitation, six days after their visit to Caesarea-Philippi, where he had asked his disciples what people were saying about him.

It’s worth mentioning that in Jesus day, **Caesarea-Philippi**, had a reputation not unlike that commonly linked with Las Vegas – it was the “Sin City” of the time, rife with pagan temples and cultic prostitution. It was the very last place any self-respecting Rabbi would take his disciples. The city was set against a huge cliff-face known as the Rock and in that cliff, was a cavern known as the ‘Gates of Hades’. This, it was believed, gave access to the underworld.

It is right here that Jesus gives Simon his knick-name - petros – the rock, and declares that because of his discernment as to whom Jesus really is, he will be the rock, the foundation stone of an ecclesia that is called not to comfort and security but to a mission that will defeat all the stratagems associated with deception and depravity of this place.

A real point of difference, and a powerful object -lesson

Now when they reach the **mountain top**, it’s not the wonderful view of Galilee that grasps their attention. No, something very strange is happening as they are together caught up in a visionary experience.

Not only does Jesus appearance appear to change but he is joined by two famous figures of the past – **Moses, and Elijah**, also shining with unearthly radiance, each also having met with God on a mountaintop.

The disciples are at a loss – not sure what is happening – and Peter impulsively burst out:

“Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

But this time his discernment is a little awry

To all Jews of the time the figures of Moses and Elijah symbolised the two primary sections of scripture – Moses, the Law, and Elijah, the Prophets,

Peter in his desire to build three equal shelters is assuming that there is an equality between Jesus and Moses and Elijah. Or in other words, Jesus teaching should be seen as having the same standing as the Torah, and the Prophetic writings. And there are those today who believe that no part of scripture has precedence.

However, immediately, as Matthew records it, a bright cloud descends and overshadows them, and a voice is heard, putting the record right.

“This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!”

The disciples were understandably terrified, and the voice clearly corrects Peter’s misperception. Moses and Elijah are important but Jesus is the one to whom you should listen. In fact, when John is writing his Gospel he speaks of Jesus as the Word - with a capital ‘W’

And Matthew, to convince his Jewish readers, uses a word that for them would echo the stories in Exodus, where the cloud led the Israelites in their desert wanderings, particularly Exodus 40:

“Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.”

The Greek word translated as ‘overshadowed’ in Matthew is the same word used in this Exodus passage. This is the very presence of God.

It’s interesting that on this occasion Jesus brought with him only three of his disciples. Of the many who followed Jesus, he had already chosen the twelve. Their names are listed 4 times – in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Acts, and in every list the first four names are Simon, his brother Andrew, James and his brother John. They are not only the first

in these lists, they were the first that Jesus called to be the nucleus of those whose task it would be to spread the new understanding of the faith of Abraham. And in the footsteps of Abraham, they were the first, at Jesus invitation, to leave the security they had known for a very uncertain and unknown future. They were the ones Jesus singled out to share this amazing experience – they witnessed the Law the Prophets and the Word connected and interacting; they heard the voice confirming Jesus as the beloved Son; they received an indelible, and unforgettable assurance to sustain them through the dark days to come.

But strangely, **on the way down** the mountain, Jesus instructs them not to share what they saw . . . the vision they experienced . . . with anyone . . . until after the Resurrection. Why?

Perhaps because until verified by the resurrection, it could easily have been dismissed as an hallucination, or a made-up story, as nay-sayers may do even today. However, Tom Wright, a current New Testament scholar of considerable ability and renown has said the story is so strange that many scholars today take that as an indication that there must have been a real historical event of this kind.

So, if they weren't going to talk about it when they came down the mountain how did we get to hear about it?

Well, of the three gospel writers who recount the story . . . none of whom were there . . . all carry Mark's version. Tradition tells us his was the earliest gospel, and Papius, a Christian writer living before AD150 (that's after the deaths of Peter and Paul) wrote this:

"Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately everything that he remembered"

Two other writers of the time say similar things, so we may safely assume that Mark, having been a long-time companion of Peter, is sharing with us Peter's own account of what happened.

I rather think it highly unlikely that any of us have had an experience quite like Peter, James and John, but I am sure that many have had what they would regard as mountain-top experiences; times when they have felt themselves to be in the presence of God; rich experiences of prayer;

