

Mount of Transfiguration: 'We have seen his glory'

Please read Exodus 34: 29-35 and Matthew 17 v 1-13, and then pray; *'Almighty God, as we open your Word, may we see more of the true glory of your only Son, our Saviour. Then, may we be ready to listen to him, and follow him all the days of our lives. May Jesus be glorified in and through us. Amen.'*

As I have already mentioned in previous sermons, the mountains of Israel played a huge part in the life and ministry of Jesus our Lord. This is hardly surprising given the place and the significance of mountains in the bible generally. We have ventured up the Mount of Temptation and the Mount of the Beatitudes, mountains that speak to us about confrontation with evil and temptation (Matthew 4: 1-11) and the nature and ways of God's Kingdom (Matthew 5-7 Sermon on the Mount).

At the end of Jesus's life, mountains which are situated in and around Jerusalem will come into focus – especially the Mount of Olives, with the cries of 'hosanna' - and the Garden of Gethsemane at its base; but also, Calvary's Mount, and then later still, the mountain in Galilee from which Jesus issued the Great Commission. (Matthew 28:16) Jesus will finally ascend to heaven from the Mount of Olives which is also known the Mount of Ascension. (Acts 1: 9-12) Besides all this, we know that Jesus would often retreat to mountains to be alone for the purpose of prayer. He would climb mountains and hills to be alone with His Father. Famously, the Psalmist wrote; *'I lift my eyes to the hills – where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.'*

However, if you think of a mountain scene that was especially important during the life of Jesus, I think you would have to turn to the amazing story of *his transfiguration* – a story which is recorded in each of the synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke. There is a real sense in which Jesus is actually 'called up this mountain' by His Father in the same way Moses was 'called up Mount Sinai.' And it was not that Jesus was called up this mountain to be alone with His Father, because there is a definite sense that he was told to bring three of his disciples *with him*. The gospels reveal that Jesus **led** three chosen disciples up a mountain – Peter and the brothers James and John. In Matthew 17:1, we are told that Jesus deliberately **took** these three men *with him*. What was going to happen, was going to happen for their benefit just as much as Jesus's.

Traditionally, the mountain in Israel associated with the transfiguration is **Mount Tabor**. (Picture 1) This mountain which is distinctly 'dome-shaped' is situated in the Galilee region of northern Israel. It is therefore quite near the Sea (Lake) of Galilee and very near to Nazareth where Jesus grew up. I wonder if Jesus climbed this mountain on boyish adventures? It is not particularly high – only about 1850 feet, but is surrounded by a wide expanse of flat land below. It is not part of a range of mountains. **Tabor stands alone**. Its dome shape makes it easily identifiable and recognisable.

Some argue that this could not be the Mount of Transfiguration because two of the gospels speak of it as a 'high mountain.' They favour Mount Hermon which as I pointed out last week is the highest mountain in Israel and the only mountain which regularly sees snow. Mount Hermon is also much nearer to Caesarea Philippi where Jesus and his disciples had been situated just a few days before this powerful experience of transfiguration.

It was at Caesarea Philippi where Peter made his famous confession: *'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.'* But we know that it was some "six days later" (17:1) that Jesus took the three disciples up a mountain, and Mount Tabor is only about 40 miles south of Caesarea Philippi, so there was ample time to get there. I am happy to stick with the belief of Mount Tabor as the location of the transfiguration. Like so many of the other famous mountains, it has its Church, (Franciscan Basilica of the Transfiguration) and there is also a Greek Orthodox monastery – both situated at the summit. The views from the top of the mountain are incredible. Whichever mountain the three disciples ascended

with Jesus, Peter in his second letter referred to as “the sacred mountain” – a place where he and the others had been **eyewitnesses of his Christ’s majesty and glory. (2 Peter 1; 16-18)**. This was another mountain, like Sinai in Egypt, which experienced the descent of the Cloud of the Glory of the Lord God Almighty.

Before we get to the details of the transfiguration, it is also important to realise that this remarkable incident marks a dramatic turning point in the life of Jesus. The focus and priority of Jesus will change after the transfiguration. Once he descends from this mountain, the journey to Jerusalem and Mount Calvary will begin in earnest. There will be a decisive shift in His focus. His ministry began from the point of his baptism and after his temptations. Whilst coming up out of the river Jordon, the voice of the Father spoke to him: *‘You are my beloved Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.’ (Luke 3:22)* Now on the Mount of Transfiguration, the Majestic Voice of God will speak again with the same holy clarity: *‘This is my Son whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him.’ (Matthew 17:5)*

Why was Jesus transfigured? Why was he called up the mountain at this mid-point in his life and ministry? Why the need to take three disciples with him? What is the relevance of all this for us? These are the key questions we will briefly consider. For anyone who is familiar with the OT story, the similarities to the story of Moses and Mount Sinai are obvious. The mountain, the ascent, the meeting with God, the descent and envelopment with the Cloud of God’s Shekinah Glory, the voice of God, the shining face. But with Jesus, this is different, very different, and we will now see why.

In the gospel of Luke, we are told that it was while Jesus was **praying**, his face began to change radically. J. Oswald Saunders refers to the transfiguration as one of the “most remarkable and mysterious incidents of his earthly life.” The disciples noticed two things about Jesus’s appearance that changed quickly and very dramatically; **his face and then his clothes**. His face began to shine with a powerful sun-like brightness, and his clothes turned to a pure bright white dazzling like lightning. What happened was this. The true glory of the Son of God – the glory and majesty of his divinity – burst forth from behind his frail humanity. The disciples were given a magnificent display of the divine glory of their Master and Lord. John in his gospel testified to the fact that – *‘We have seen his glory – the glory of the One and only, who came from the Father full of grace and truth.’ (John 1:14b)* The apostle Peter wrote this about what the 3 experienced; *‘we were eyewitnesses of his majesty...’ (2 Peter 1:16)*

Previously they and the other disciples had been eyewitnesses of Jesus’s glory – but this glory was witnessed through the miracles they saw him perform before their very eyes. Jesus revealed his glory through miraculous signs – through dramatic healings, exorcisms, by feeding huge numbers of men, women, and children, by changing water into wine, by stilling storms, walking on water, raising people from the dead. Now **this** was different! The glory was not shining through Jesus’s works but through his very being! The glory and majesty of God were clearly and brilliantly shining in him and from him. It was glorious to behold. And this is not reflected glory as it was in the case of the radiant face of Moses. This was the glory of God in person – the person of God the Son!

Then the disciples see something else. Two other figures appear. Moses and Elijah. They come from amidst God’s glory to speak with Jesus. They represent the law and the prophets, but they come now to speak with the One who fulfils all that the law and the prophets had spoken about. (Luke 24: 27,44) These two great OT figures come *to support and serve their Lord*. Both had climbed Sinai at different times in the past and met with God. Now both appear on this mountain to meet with the Son of God. They come to speak to him about his soon coming “exodus” and all that will occur in Jerusalem. (Luke 9:31) They come to encourage Jesus in his journey to the cross. For on that cross, Jesus will meet all the demands of the law of Moses, and Jesus will fulfil all the prophecies of the suffering and sacrifice

of the Servant Messiah. The Son of God is going up to Jerusalem “to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45) Moses and Elijah offer support and perhaps prayer.

Jesus is being prepared for the future by His Father and through the visitation of Moses and Elijah. Incidentally, is not it amazing that Moses finally got to stand in the promised land! In life, he had viewed the land from Mount Nebo just before his death. Now he stands inside it, on Mount Tabor, with the Son of God. So, if Jesus is being prepared for his suffering and death, what is the purpose of all this for those stunned and fearful disciples? Clearly Jesus wanted them to witness all this – but why?

He wanted them (**and us**) to be in no doubt about his personal glory and divinity. The disciples were following and would continue to follow the Son of the living God, the Holy One who shared all the glory of the Father. **This knowledge of Jesus** would enable them to face the challenges and the sufferings of future times, beyond the resurrection. Being a Christian is tough and we need to know for certain who our Lord and Saviour really is. Then, and only then, will we be willing and ready to give our all for Jesus – even our lives. Consider the boldness of Peter’s preaching and leadership on the day of Pentecost;

Therefore, let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.’ (Acts 2:36)

We are all faced with a stark decision. Will we follow Jesus? This Jesus who demonstrated in so many ways, and especially through his transfiguration and resurrection that He is undoubtedly the Son of God. Before his transfiguration at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus declared to his disciples that anyone who would follow him “must deny himself, take up his cross and follow him.” (Matthew 16:24) Are we prepared to do this. This will be the challenge we all face again in the season of Lent which begins next week. **Will we take up our cross and follow Jesus to His?** The transfiguration inspires us to do so.

And if we decide to follow Jesus, we not only take the journey to the cross, where we kneel and worship the One who gave his life for the sins of the world, **we embark of a journey of personal repentance, change and transformation.** We pick up our own cross. We are called to be personally **transformed** in this life before we are transfigured and glorified in the life to come. The Christian life is a life of personal transformation and a life which aims to bring transformation to others. That transformation concerns being transformed into conformity with Christ’s image, Christ’s ways, and Christ’s will. Transformation which enables and encourages the coming and reigning of God’s kingdom into human hearts and human communities like ours. In Romans the apostle Paul writes passionately about Christians “being conformed to the likeness of God’s Son.” (Romans 8:29) And in his second letter to the Corinthians he writes of the ongoing experience of everyone who believes and accepts Jesus as Lord.

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom. And we who with unveiled faces (referencing Moses) all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3: 17-18)

This is a **transformation of character**, so that our character reflects and radiates the character of our Lord Jesus. And so, we can confidently move on to how this transformation from one degree of glory to another takes place. It takes place as we allow the gift and life of the Holy Spirit to so work in us and through us – that conformity to Jesus grows and grows and grows. With the Spirit living in us, there is a powerful and purposeful *inner transformation* which means Jesus can be reflected outwards in all our behaviour and actions. Jesus can be seen in us in an ever-increasing measure. As Charles Wesley puts it; ‘*Changed from glory into glory till in heaven we take our place.*’ The Church community and each individual follower of Jesus should be reflecting His radiant beauty and glory to the world around?

Do we do that? Do you hunger to do that in growing measure? Do we sense this inner change taking place? Are we compliant to this work of the Spirit of Jesus?

The Spirit wants to work with transforming power and light within us all. We have our part to play as well – and this is highlighted in the transfiguration narrative. **The Voice from heaven on this occasion is addressed to the three disciples not to Jesus.** They are told that Jesus is God's Son. God is well-pleased with His Son. Then comes the challenge to them and to the Church that will be built by them in the power of the Spirit. **Listen to him.** This is my well-beloved Son. **Listen to Him!** (17:5)

This is the God-ordained way to be transformed. We listen humbly and carefully to the Son of God. We follow his commands. We do His will. We conform to His pattern. We put into practice His Words – like the words He taught from the Mount of the Beatitudes. We start and continue to live throughout life as children of the Kingdom of God under the Lordship of Jesus. Jesus gives us His Word and His Spirit – so that we might be transformed and become reflectors of His love, beauty, and glory. As we sang earlier; *'Open our ears Lord, and teach us to listen.'* Could this be our Lenten prayer this year? Could we aim to be like Mary who sat at the Lord's feet and was commended for her eagerness to listen? (Luke 10:39)

We are predestined to be changed into the likeness of Jesus, by the power of the Spirit and the Word of God. And then after death, or at the return of Christ the Lord, we are destined to be totally transfigured and glorified. **Our ultimate hope is glorification** within the fullness of God's eternal Kingdom. Remember Paul's golden chain in Romans? God is committed to our transformation and glorification. *'For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.'* (Romans 8: 29-30) God is committed in love to take us toward glorification and indescribable joy in His eternal presence.

'But we know that when he appears – we shall be like, for we shall see him as He is.' (1 John 3:2) We shall be like the One who is glorified, and we shall enjoy his glory forever. In the words of the songwriter, Marilyn Baker;

*Jesus, you are changing me, by your Spirit, you're making me like you.
Jesus, you're transforming me, that your loveliness may be seen in all I do.
You are the potter and I am the clay – help me to be willing to let you have your way.
Jesus you are changing me, as I let you reign supreme within my heart.*

Or as Graham Kendrick puts it in his song which emphasises Christians as shining people:

*As we gaze on your kingly brightness, so our faces display your likeness;
ever changing from glory to glory, mirrored here may our lives tell your story –
Shine on me, shine on me.*

May we be those who worship the Son of God, **listen to him** carefully, to the Holy One who was transfigured on top of the mountain, so that we can build a rock-solid foundation through obedience to His Word. May our lives tell His story and point toward His glory. Amen.

(Revd Peter J Clarkson 15.2.26)

