

The Transfiguration

Matthew 17:1-9

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white (foretaste of Jesus coming again at the end of the age?). Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, "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." While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid". And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead." (NRSV)

Mentioned in each of the synoptic gospels – Matthew 17:1-9, Mark 9:2-10, Luke 9:28-36

Well the transfiguration of Jesus is I think one of those passages which has many different interpretations. There have been many opinions about its meaning and why it happened and why it is included in the 3 synoptic gospels and not in John's gospel. There have been doubts about its historical accuracy, and there has even been one interpretation that has said it is a misplaced post-resurrection narrative, meaning that the transfiguration actually happened after Jesus had risen from the dead, and was mistakenly put into the text in the middle of the gospels. I don't hold to that view because I think it fits in very well where it is, especially if you look at the context in which it happened and the events immediately preceding it. On top of that, Jesus clearly orders Peter, James and John not to tell others about the transfiguration until after he has been raised from the dead. There is no coincidence that all 3 gospel accounts have exactly the same sequence of narrative leading up to and following the Transfiguration:

1. Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ
2. Jesus' order not to tell others about this
3. Jesus' prediction of his coming suffering, death and resurrection
4. Jesus' call to those who want to be his disciples to follow him in self-sacrifice
5. the transfiguration itself
6. Jesus' command not to tell others about this until after his resurrection
7. a discussion (except in Luke) on the coming of Elijah (John the Baptist)
8. the healing of a boy; and
9. a second prediction of Jesus' passion

All 3 gospel accounts were making a point, But what was it?

So why did it happen? What does it mean, and importantly, what does it tell us today?

The first thing to consider when looking at this event, as with any study of the Bible, is to look at its context. What was the setting in which the transfiguration happened? So to do that, let's have a look at the passage before the transfiguration to set the scene. Because without doing this, we lose most of the meaning behind this fascinating event. (Read Peter's confession before transfiguration story).

Looking at this passage before the transfiguration story, and then looking at the transfiguration story itself, we can begin to see that there is so much Old Testament imagery in the telling of this event. For example, both Matthew and Mark explicitly say that it was 6 days after Jesus spoke about seeing the power of the kingdom that the Transfiguration took place. This can be compared to the 6 days of Exodus 24:16 when Moses, took three men with him, the same as what Jesus did, and experienced the glory of God on Mt Sinai (read Ex 24:12-18). The fact that it happened on a mountain is also reminiscent of Moses seeing the glory of God, and then the cloud hovering over them is reminiscent of the cloud covering Mt Sinai, from which the voice of God spoke to

Moses. Then of course there is the appearance at the transfiguration of Moses and Elijah, 2 of the most famous names of the Old Testament. Why Moses and Elijah? One common belief is to see in this, Moses and Elijah representing the Law and the Prophets respectively. And Jesus came to fulfil both roles. What did he say about the law specifically – I have not come to do away with the Law but to fulfil it. As well as their prominence as spiritual leaders, they also have in common an unusual conclusion to their lives. Moses dies a normal death, although it could be said, looking at the last chapter of Deuteronomy, that he seems to have been buried by God unseen. That passage says he dies at the Lord's command and was buried in a valley but no one knows his burial place to this day. And then we read in 2 Kings that Elijah was taken up into heaven in a whirlwind in a chariot of fire and horses. Jesus of course also had a significant ending to his life, crucified for us and then being raised again to life.

Finally, the words from heaven "this is my Beloved Son" are also reminiscent of the Old Testament, from Psalm 2:7 and is similar to what was said at Jesus' baptism. I'll deal with this a bit later.

One possible meaning of this passage is that the conversation between Jesus, Moses and Elijah provides assurance for Jesus in preparation for his suffering.

This reading from Matthew's gospel has a few details that are not mentioned in the other 2 accounts. In my study for today's message, one thing that stuck out at me from Matthew's passage which is not in the other 2 accounts, and which, curiously, I couldn't find anything written about, was the fact that when the disciples heard the voice from the cloud and fell to the ground overcome by fear, that Jesus came over to them and touched them, saying "Get up and do not be afraid". Maybe it's just where I'm at personally, or it relates to my experience of faith, but it just hit me that the text specifically mentions that Jesus touched them, after they had just been totally floored by what they had seen. Jesus touching people is significant throughout the gospels. He touches lepers when everyone else just wanted to be a million miles from those unclean dirty people. Throughout his earthly life, the fact that Jesus touches people in this way shows his overwhelming care for the people he comes into contact with. But then, after He touches them, he encourages them again, not just saying "do not be afraid" but adding, "get up and do not be afraid". When we have fallen or are fearful He always tells us to get up and not to wallow in our misery, fear and self-pity. Jesus wants us to forget ourselves and take his hand and get back on the road. I think that when we get to heaven we will look at our lives and say 'why didn't I take more risks?', 'why did I let fear control me so much?' If we could be liberated from that fear which controls us – if we would let Jesus free us from that fear, it would change our lives – we would never be the same. If ever you wanted confirmation of your faith, the faith that frees us from the bondage to ourselves, that Jesus is who He says He is, then the experience of Peter, James and John on the mount that day would surely be it. As a little aside, it's interesting that, after they have just been completely flabbergasted by what they have seen, Jesus tells them not to tell anyone about it!

For all the different interpretations of the transfiguration of Jesus, and all the links we can make to other Biblical passages to make sense of it, there are 3 main themes to come out of it. Firstly there is Peter's confession before hand. Jesus had just asked the disciples who people said He is, then He put the question on them. So what do you think – who do you say that I am? Peter, ever the first to speak up, left no doubt – "you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God". The second theme to come out of this story is the statements of Jesus about Himself – his command that the way of the cross is the way to life. And the third theme to come out is the affirmation out of the cloud by God Himself about the identity of Jesus – this is my beloved Son – listen to Him". I wonder how much attention Peter paid to that last statement – listen to Him – after Jesus had just a week earlier told 'Satan' to get behind Him when Peter rebuked Jesus for saying that He must suffer. Remember, Peter said "Lord this must never happen". Then a week later the voice comes out of the cloud while Peter is there – listen to Him. It's like Peter was being given a reminder by the very voice of God himself that he doesn't need to tell Jesus what to do – Jesus knows what he is up to so listen to Him. Listen and trust. Listen and trust and join Him on the great

adventure. Let him do the driving – let him be in the pilot’s seat of your life – don’t try to do it yourself because it doesn’t work. Follow the example of Jesus himself when, even in the hour of his greatest need, in the moment of his greatest despair, he said not my will but thine be done. Listen to Him – this is the best prayer to pray – not for good things to happen, for more of this or that. The most important thing to pray for is not for your relationships to be healed (though that is a noble thing to pray for in itself), or for a new place to live. But the thing to pray is for knowledge of his will come what may – I pray that your will be done in my life. Place me where you want me to be, even if it’s in this place that I currently don’t want to be in. when that is our prayer, then we will know life, then we will know God and like Paul, we will be content whatever the circumstances – maybe not happy as the world defines happy – but with a quiet peace and a real joy welling up inside us.

This story of the transfiguration has so many things that we can take from it. But let’s have a closer look at the three themes that I mentioned before. The first theme is the confession of Peter. As we saw previously, Jesus asks the disciples who people think he is. Then he asks the disciples themselves about who they think he is. Peter categorically states “you are God’s messiah, the son of the living God”. The thing I admire about Peter is that he is never afraid to speak up. He makes a fool of himself at times but I can learn a lesson from him – and that is to have the courage of your convictions and act on them. Peter stated what he was convinced of – that here he was with the Son of God himself, and there was no better place in the world to be. Peter’s conviction was then amazingly confirmed just 6 days later when his Lord was transfigured before him. Peter, on whom Jesus said he would build his church and the gates of hell will never overcome it. I mean, have a think about this whole passage. If you ever wanted confirmation that Jesus is who he says he is, read the story of the transfiguration. Imagine what must have been going on inside Peter when he brazenly declared “yes, you are the Son of God” and then, if there was still any lingering doubt in his mind, any lingering doubt that he was just shooting his mouth off again, his bold confession is actually confirmed in the most breathtaking and faith-affirming way. He actually sees Jesus in his glory.

The second theme we need to look at is the statements of Jesus about himself and why he came. Again we need to look at the passage immediately preceding the transfiguration. After Peter’s audacious confession, Jesus goes on to say what was shocking and incomprehensible news to the disciples – that he, the Son of God, must actually suffer at the hands of the scribes and chief priests and actually die. The fact that he also mentioned that he would be raised to life again seems to have been missed by Peter. He just couldn’t believe that the Lord, the messiah himself would actually have to suffer. Why? I mean, what are you talking about Lord? There’s something you’re missing here. You’re the messiah! It just didn’t make any sense. This wasn’t what was supposed to happen to the messiah. Then Jesus once again, like he always does with us, says it like it is, not as we would like it to be. As well as saying that he must suffer and die before being raised again to life, he tells us what is expected of his followers – if any want to be my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me. This is not a happy clappy Christianity where we come to Jesus and the shadows fall behind. This is a Christianity where the way of the cross is the way to life – and it is difficult. We often don’t know what to expect and we often don’t understand God. **However**, and this is the trick – in our struggle on the road of life with Jesus, we don’t need to strive for ourselves. Jesus is there with us, walking alongside us and carrying us when we struggle.

You probably know the story of the footsteps in the sand – has everyone heard of that story? Where a person is having a dream that he is walking along a beach and he sees 2 sets of footsteps – his own and his Lord’s. At times, often the lowest times in his life, he sees only one set of footsteps as he is following Jesus on the road of life. Bothered by this, he questions Jesus about it, asking why, at the worst times in his life, there is only one set of footsteps when Jesus has promised to be with him all the way; to which Jesus replies with infinite love and compassion, my child, during those times of trial and suffering, when you see only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you. We need never fear as we follow Jesus on the way – it actually frees us to deny ourselves, to forget our selves and our worries and to focus on mission and service for the

kingdom. We are free to love, free to serve, free to give without counting the cost. And in doing that we know God, joy wells up inside us – such a contrast to the fear and self-loathing we experience when we hang on to the things we hold dear. For what does it profit a person to gain the whole world but lose their very self. What point is there to working 80 or 90 hours a week, what point is there to slave away all our lives in the rat race if, at the end of it, we still haven't found what we are really looking for? As someone has said, when you're lying on your deathbed, you're not going to look back at your life and wish you'd spent more time in the office. What point is there to wasting our lives on the things that don't really matter, whether it be work or anything else? Have a think about what it might be for you. The words of Jesus have striking relevance to us today in the 21st century in our affluent western life. We have a lot to learn from our brothers and sisters in the poor countries of the world whose faith in the worst of times is a fierce challenge to us in our lives here. One of the big issues to come out of the tsunami tragedy is that of how a loving and compassionate God could let something like this happen, especially as it happened to many of the poorest people in the world. Tim Costello, who recently returned from Sri Lanka, one of the worst hit areas, said that people over there are not asking "how can I believe in God after this has happened?". They are asking "how can I **not** believe in God – He's all I've got left". The people who are saying this have lost everything but they have not lost themselves.

The third theme to come out of this fantastic passage is God's affirmation of his beloved Son, the one with whom he is well pleased. It is significant too that the voice, as well as being one of complete reassurance, for the disciples (and perhaps for Jesus too), also finishes with the command to "listen to Him", as I mentioned before. For the disciples, as well as the readers of the gospels, this is a confirmation from God Himself of Jesus' mission. It is God putting his stamp of approval on Jesus and His ministry, just like He did at Jesus' baptism. This man is in fact the Son of God, just in case we had any doubts. Looking at passages like this, how any so-called scholars can seriously say that Jesus never claimed to be the Son of God is just beyond me. In this passage alone, Jesus accepted what the voice from the cloud said, and certainly the writers of the gospels accepted that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God. There are many instances in all 4 gospels where He very clearly states who He is. There is simply no margin for doubt about what He claimed. This passage about the transfiguration can be a sure affirmation for us in those times when we doubt. In my readings of Matthew's gospel over the last month or so, one thing that has been standing out to me is the intimate relationship with the Father that Jesus had. And this passage is affirmation from the other way if you like, it says that yes, this Jesus is in fact my Son, and I do in fact have an intimate relationship with Him – I am revealing myself to you in Him. This Jesus is in fact God incarnate – God in the flesh.

The final statement, that God tells us after declaring that Jesus is his beloved son is to "listen to Him". There is the reassurance, and then there is the call to mission. Listen to Him, follow Him. And to set the context once again, Jesus says, just before His transfiguration that anyone who wants to follow Him must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow in the Master's footsteps on the road of life.

The Transfiguration is a pivotal event in Jesus ministry for after it he starts to head toward Jerusalem, toward his death. He was about to take up his own cross.

One thing I have mentioned a few times when I've spoken here is how the Bible is unique among all books in the way it fits together, even though it was written over thousands of years by people of differing backgrounds and cultures. The transfiguration of Jesus shows us this yet again, with the links to the Old Testament in how God revealed Himself to his people. When we look at this story, let's remember what it says to us, particularly the overarching message – the message that all 3 gospel accounts emphasise so strongly - this is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased – listen to Him.

*by Nils von Kalm
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