

Transfiguration Sunday
Matthew 17:1-9 and 2 Peter 1:16-21

Prepared March 2014

The Transfiguration

17 And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. ² And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. ³ And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴ And Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." ⁵ He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." ⁶ When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified. ⁷ But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Rise, and have no fear." ⁸ And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.

⁹ And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, "Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead."

Christ's Glory and the Prophetic Word

¹⁶ For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. ¹⁷ For when he received honour and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," ¹⁸ we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. ¹⁹ And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, ²⁰ knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. ²¹ For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

Gospel

In today's Gospel we hear a story about Jesus taking Peter, James and John up a mountain and them witnessing things that they would never forget. Let's set the scene:

They had been disciples of Jesus for some years but lately they had cause to be confused and alarmed. Jesus was talking more and more about suffering. This was a concern and Peter had even taken Jesus aside to speak to him about this. All this talk about a cross and dying in Jerusalem was stressful. This was not a happy church!

In that frame Jesus does something unexpected. He takes his three closest disciples up a mountain. There it happens: Jesus is transfigured. They see him in such glory and majestic beauty that they are blown away, awed and more than a bit frightened.

They got to see Jesus in his glory like no one else had ever done so before. This was awesome! Peter got excited and began blabbering about building some accommodation units for Jesus as well as Moses and Elijah so they could hold the moment.

Peter's suggestion is silenced by a majestic voice from heaven, that declares Jesus to be HIS Son and commands them to listen to him. Forget about building huts on mountains, just listen!

What the three disciples saw was the flip side or the conclusion of the suffering Jesus had been talking about. The suffering was going to happen. Jesus would undergo his exodus in Jerusalem yet that suffering was linked to the future revelation of what they were privileged to see that day as a preview.

Suffering and glory are linked. For the glory of God to be revealed in Jesus and in us it will take suffering. That could be taken as a stand-alone truism or abstract philosophical statement but for

Peter, James and John, it would work out through the rest of their lives. All three would suffer for the hope of the glory they saw that day revealed in their friend Jesus and so what they actually saw and heard really mattered. The cross Jesus spoke of is not just a poetic image.

On that day they were commanded to be quiet but years later they would be recognized as the first Apostles, the men who could provide the first hand witness to the Risen Jesus and proclaim the Gospel of Jesus' second coming.

Peter, James and John along with the others and Paul would declare in the face of the proud powers of this world that Jesus would be coming back in glory in a way no one could overlook. He will come back:

- To consummate the kingdom of his Father and cement it in place (Revelation 11:15-18)
- To call and raise the dead by name (John 5:28)
- To judge the living and the dead.
- To see the lawless one destroyed with all his hosts. (2 Thessalonians 2:8 & Revelation 19:11-16)

While all the apostles had seen the risen Lord and could preach this message, only Peter, James and John saw the transfigured Jesus on the mountain and beheld the glory that would one day be revealed at the second coming. They had more cause to appreciate what was coming when Christ returns.

Twentieth Century

Let's jump forward now to the 20th century when it became fashionable to look at this story and so many other stories in the Bible as if they were myths that did not really happen as we read them. In modern use 'myth' is a technical word to describe stories that may convey truth but are not true in the way you would expect a newspaper or history book to be true. They are fabrications designed to communicate a mystery.

In the 1940s it was famously said that, in the age of electric lighting and radios that belief in miracles was no longer really possible or intellectually sustainable. Science explained too much for people to believe in miracles as described in the Bible. However many learned people still enjoyed reading, studying and even preaching the stories of the Bible. So the way to resolve all this was to say: These wonderful stories about Jesus that inspire and communicate so much truth were myths - true but not real.

Myths to:

- inspire hope and bring assurance,
- raise people up out of their despair in face of death,
- encourage even at cost of suffering to choose for the light in a dark world,
- or to explain why things are the way they are.

What you need to do with a religious myth as found in the Gospels, we were told, is strip away the miraculous and find the essence of the truth that is being said, a bit like gold mining in separating dirt from gold!

During my training and theological formation this was one line of thinking in Biblical scholarship alongside scholarship that accepted the Jesus stories as found in the Gospels on face value.

Back in ancient times myths were popular. 'Myth' is actually a Greek word and the Pagans, along with many Jews as well, happily devised stories that helped people cope with life and face the challenges of being human. The question is whether the Bible is such a book too.

Even in the decades directly after Jesus there were people who reshaped the Gospel from:

- Jesus was born of a woman, died on a cross,
- was raised from death and
- is coming again

to say things like:

- You have already been raised.
- You have already attained the Kingdom.
- You are all gods.
- Jesus has already returned.

The apostles knew that this was happening and they combatted it without compromise. There was no room for reinvention of the apostolic Gospel in the Early Church. The Gospel was based on God's real activity in history and not just a grand well-meaning myth to stir and lift the heart. The Gospel is about what God has done and what he has said he will do.

Personal Illustration

This story may help describe what is at stake here:

In late 1999 I was called out one Friday evening to pray with a woman facing a crisis. She was several months pregnant and after some weeks of heavy bleeding had been told by her doctor that the situation was beyond hope and so an appointment had been made to clear the womb on the following Monday.

So with her two children being cared for in the living room we found a place to pray. I don't know how to pray at times like this so I listen and listen hard. As I listened I began to feel stirred with indignation. This was so not right! Then I heard the phrase: "He will be born on the due date."

I was fixed to the spot. As a mainline church minister I was steeped in avoiding manipulation of vulnerable people and playing on people's hopes. No predictions was the rule! Yet this was so strong I could not ignore it. So with careful framing I said to the woman: "What I think I hear is: He *will* be born on the due date." She did not flinch but took it in faith and decided to cancel the scheduled procedure.

I forget how many months it was from then that I lived with a mixture of gratitude for every week that her pregnancy lasted and doubt that my two predictions would hold. Any baby born safe and well on any day would be wonderful enough but a boy on the due date would mean a whole lot more.

The day came and a healthy boy was safely born.

During those months of waiting I was often wondering whether I had really-really heard and spoken from God that Friday evening or had just got carried away with the moment and said kind words to give false hope. Time would tell.

There is a world of difference between trading in sweet mythical stories that allow people to face another day and speaking out God's sovereign truth stirred up by the Holy Spirit about history yet to come.

Peter refers to this in v.21.

... no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

God's revealed truth and our best wishes are two very different categories and should not be mixed.

Getting two out of two predictions right in a matter beyond human influence encouraged me in the scary adventure of hearing and speaking what the Holy Spirit sometimes stirs to a whisper when I listen.

Now back to the scriptures, in today's Epistle we hear Peter referring to the Transfiguration 30 years earlier:

2 Peter 1:16-21

16 For we [*Peter James & John*] did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. 17 For he received honour and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." 18 We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.

No cleverly devised myths or feel-good stories says Peter. We write as eye-witnesses and we heard God's voice on that mountain. We are dealing in fact and not fiction.

That is the same confidence I have in the Gospel as we will affirm shortly through the Creed and the mystery of our faith:

Christ *has* died,
 Christ *is* risen,
 Christ *will* come again.

Conclusion & Application

In the Protestant Canon The Bible is a diverse collection of 66 books. It contains many genres of writing from epic story, through poetry, prophecy, apocalyptic, gospel and history.

It cannot all be read cover to cover like a newspaper or a scientific report. It was not written that way. Inspired people used various styles of literature to convey God's revelation as received in various ways.

But today we heard a crucial story of reliable witness to what three men saw and heard one day on a mountain. They held to that story through the rest of their lives and it provided them with the certainty, inspiration and faith to proclaim what they had heard from Jesus without blinking. Sane people do not live and die for a myth. Sane adults know the difference between fact and fiction.

To those who said the story of God coming in a baby, dying, rising and one day returning was myth to raise our spirits, Peter says, as John does in his Gospel: We were there. We saw the glory. We heard the voice. So we tell you, He is coming again and when he comes, He will be glorious! That is the message of this book.

So as we heard from Peter today: [2 Pet 2.19]

You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.

As we are attentive to the reliable witness of those who saw and heard and to the witness of the Holy Spirit moving in our hearts we are empowered to live and live fully in the face of death and all its symptoms. Yes there is and will be hardship and suffering and yes, in Christ there will be glory and God is in it all. To say otherwise is a distortion of the Gospel.

So live, step forward, move out, seize the day! Stun the world with a hope that comes from heaven and brightens the earth. Be the people who know how to live with no fear of death because Jesus showed the way and revealed the coming reality in himself.