

St Marc, Grenoble
Sunday 19th February 2023 (Sunday before Lent)

Exodus 24: 12 - 18

Matthew 17: 1 - 9

'Come up the Mountain'

Good morning everyone, both here in Church and those joining us on Zoom - you are all welcome! **Let's Pray.**

As usual, I'd like you to share what you picked up from these remarkable readings this morning, and particularly what struck you about them?? Thank You

I've preached on this reading from Matthew (and the same story in Mark's Gospel - Mark: 9) a number of times before.

For me, it really is one of the most amazing stories in the Gospels and it is fascinating to explore. Every time, I realise the story of this event is rather like an onion: you can just keep peeling layer after layer of information and detail from it.

Sometimes the lectionary gives a real progression through the readings, today is one of those days: The Exodus reading recalls the time, when God called to Moses: 'Come up to me on the mountain ...the cloud covered the mountain for **six** days'. Moses had a conversation with God and came away with God's instructions for life.

Today's Gospel reading records the event usually described as the 'Transfiguration'; a more modern word would be 'transformation'.

But, for a moment, let's take a step back, to put that Matthew reading into context. In the previous chapter, Jesus had told His disciples He would be going to Jerusalem, and would undergo great suffering and be killed.

It was a total shock to them; Peter in particular, said 'God forbid it Lord, this must never happen to you.' But, Jesus was insistent – it had to happen.

Then, **six days later** (please understand that reference is no coincidence) Jesus took Peter, James and John, possibly his three best friends, away to the top of a high mountain (often thought to be Mount Hermon, which is just North of Caesarea Philippi, where the last part of the story happened. Although some scholars think it may have been Mount Tabor.)

You could say He took them on a retreat; a time for reflection and closeness to God; and, it certainly turned out to be an occasion when they would hear God's voice!

We're told that, at the top of the mountain, Jesus was 'transfigured' or transformed – before their eyes. Some commentators ask: What happened? This may have been 'just a vision' Personally, I don't think that's the issue; although, I do wonder who it affected more?

Because it's out of our normal spectrum of experience, some people find it hard to understand, or accept as an actual occurrence; but Peter himself refers to the occasion - as an experience of 'Majestic Glory' in his second epistle (2 Peter 1) - it obviously made a very deep, indelible and lifelong impression on him.

God had something extremely important to reveal to these disciples. We're told Jesus' clothes shone, with a brilliant whiteness no laundry could match – a sure sign of His extra-ordinariness, indeed His holiness.

Jesus' appearance was temporarily transformed, but the occasion made a deep and permanent impression on the disciples' understanding of Him, His relationship with the Father and His mission on earth.

We're also told that they saw Elijah and Moses in close conversation with Jesus. [What do we know that's particularly special about Elijah *and* Moses??] Neither of them seem to have died in the normal way (see Deut 34 & 2 Kings 20) they were both taken from human view and 'disappeared'. I understand the Jewish people of the day considered them to be 'living with God in heaven'.

Not surprisingly, the three disciples were terrified and, as happens to some people when they're frightened, Peter couldn't stop talking! He suggested making three booths/ shelters / memorials so Jesus and the two prophets could stay/ remain there. It was such a shattering experience of God's closeness, he didn't want it to end.

In my experience, the reality of occasional human close experiences of God's presence is that we still have to go back into our normal surroundings; although, hopefully, transformed and strengthened by our experience of encountering God. We're told a cloud overshadowed them –

What does that remind you of? What does it signify? Yes – usually signifies the reality of God's presence.

More than 1000 yrs earlier a pillar of cloud by day, and a pillar of fire by night indicated God's presence and guidance with the Children of Israel as they wandered in the wilderness. Also, as we heard in our Exodus reading, when Moses met God on Mount Sinai, the cloud covered the top of the mountain for six days.

This was Holy Ground indeed! A voice, clearly identified as God's voice – made it quite clear why they were there: "This is my Son, the Beloved...Listen to Him! (Listen to what He's telling you!) It was a moment of transformation and revelation.

Later, as they walked down the mountain [imagine the overflow of their emotions] we're told Jesus instructed them not to talk about it "until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead." They didn't understand what He meant then, but they certainly did eventually – later.

We often don't fully understand God's instructions, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't obey them. The reason usually becomes quite clear later.

This was a dramatic moment, the three disciples had been given a clear revelation of Jesus' relationship to God, and His 'Messiahship'; but it also explained – even if they didn't understand it at the time – the necessity of Jesus' suffering.

The disciples received a clear message from God! We need to ask: 'What does all this have to say to us?' And, the answer may be quite different for each one of us.

So, I'd like to suggest four Points to ponder and chew over in our hearts and minds, this week, as Lent begins:

- We need to make space, especially during Lent, not only to allow God to reveal himself and speak to us – but also to listen carefully to what He is telling us.
- Special times when we feel close to God are wonderful; but we must keep on living out our faith in tougher times too – and know that God is still with us.
- We shouldn't expect to understand everything about Jesus at once – it may take a lifetime – and beyond!
- God's rules or instructions may often seem hard to understand, but we should still accept and obey them; clarity will come later!

So, there's your 'homework' for this week!

Also, if you possibly can, please join us on Wednesday evening at 8.00pm for our short Ash Wednesday service - which is the traditional start of Lent.

So now, as I close, let's pray and ask God to transform us, and our love for Jesus in the week ahead and, hopefully, as we spend a little more time meditating with him during Lent ...

Heavenly Father, help us to climb up our own mountain, to hear your voice; and help our lives to be transformed by a personal experience of your Glory ... for Jesus' sake ... Amen