

150226 'And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. 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." 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." When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Rise, and have no fear." And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.' (Matthew 17:3-8)

Matthew describes the scene at the Transfiguration. For regular readers of the Bible, this is one of those passages (described in three of the gospels) where one knows what is going to happen. It is easy to miss details and make a disconnect between what happens in vv.1-2 and that which occurs afterwards.

An example is that in vv.1-2 there is no talking, just the vision of what is described:

'And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, 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 white as light.'

Then in v.3 we have a mixture of the 'supernatural' and the 'natural'. The 'supernatural' because both Moses and Elijah are dead in the physical sense, yet very much alive in a spiritual sense and they are talking with a physical Jesus 'transfigured before them' and, both he and his clothes 'became white as light.'

What we have is not just a vision of what is going on, in the way that someone might stand and look at a spectacle, but an interaction between the physical and spiritual world, intertwining between one and the other.

Peter, feels he has to do something, so he begins to speak to Jesus himself, but the account does suggest that at this point Jesus may well still be transfigured.

We must presume that Moses and Elijah had stopped talking to Jesus already, allowing Peter to then do so. However, Peter had not finished his words 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."'

The disciples were on their knees, face down in a confusion of fear, awe and worship, when the cloud must have disappeared and at the end of the passage, we are told 'they saw no one but Jesus only'. The physical/spiritual interaction had come to an end.

What then is going on here and what was the point of it? What we are reading about is what is called a Theophany, a visible manifestation of God to human kind. Another example of this is that of Moses and his experience of asking to see the glory of God pass by him (Exodus 33:17-23). There, Moses is only permitted to see God's back, as to see his face would have resulted in Moses' death.

In Matthew 17 we see something different. We see a manifestation of God but a cloud is hiding him from the onlookers.

We do though see a manifestation of God's glory in the act of the transfiguration of Jesus from a physical human (he didn't turn into something else) into a spiritual phenomenon, just long enough for the disciples to be astounded to the extent that they could no longer stand. Then, 'Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Rise, and have no fear." And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.'

The Transfiguration reveals to the disciples the true natures of Jesus, divine as well as human. It was almost certainly the turning point in the disciple's minds that Jesus was who he had said he was all along. It also confirms for us that, as the disciples saw their Lord in a new light, they also experienced something else that settled their mind for them.

This Jesus, who was standing before them, was not just a wise sage with wise teachings and a healing ministry that was of a magnitude unseen elsewhere; he was not just a holy man; the transfiguration had made of Jesus something that made God real to them, so real as to challenge whatever they thought previously about him. Was this man really what the voice had said: 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.'

This is something to challenge us. Who is Jesus for us? A wise sage or the Son of God?