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The Real Jesus

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This week's bible reading is from Mark chapter 1 verses 2 - 10.

Introduction

Our Gospel reading from Mark today is, as you heard, the account of Jesus' Transfiguration; an event which I find to be one of the most fascinating and exciting events in Jesus' earthly life, and it's a real high point in Mark's Gospel.

By way of explanation - the word transfiguration isn't really used in everyday language today, but it's meaning is simple enough: it means "to change in outward form or appearance". So, what happened in the incident we just read, is that Jesus that was 'transfigured' in front of His disciples -meaning His appearance changed; and for a short time He looked very different indeed, shining with an astonishing brilliance and splendour; and I'll come back to this in a moment.

Now although nobody actually uses the word transfigure anymore, transfigurations (albeit of a slightly different kind) are actually big business today; especially so among the rich and famous. Many a celebrity has felt the need to go under the knife to have their appearance altered in some way, usually with the aim of making them look more attractive or more youthful - and as I said, it's big business.

Why people, especially celebrities, choose to do this, is easy enough to understand. Everyone wants to try and keep their youthful good looks as long as possible and in the age of social media, image is so important, especially if you're in the entertainment business. Vanity of course, is also a big factor when it comes to image and looks. But what about Jesus? Why did He choose to have His appearance change in front of His disciples? What was the purpose of the Transfiguration on that mountain top with Peter, James and John?

Peter's Confession

Well so far in His ministry, things have been going reasonable well for Jesus. He had performed many miracles, cast out demons and healed the sick - and great crowds had flocked to hear his teaching. So Jesus, and no doubt His disciples too, were on a bit of a roll. And the culmination of this first half of Jesus' ministry was Peter's Confession, recorded for us just a few verses earlier in Mark's Gospel, at the end of chapter 8. There we read that Peter openly declares (or confesses) that Jesus was the

Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the Most High God. And Jesus confirms that Peter is correct (cf. Matt 16:17).

So then, things were going well, but Jesus knew that this situation wasn't going to last. The storm clouds were already gathering and soon Jesus would head for Jerusalem and things were going to get decidedly more difficult and the opposition would intensify. The horror, of course, would peak on Good Friday when Jesus would be crucified and the disciples scattered. Whilst Jesus knew what was coming, the disciples didn't – they were blissfully unaware that all this lay ahead.

Eight Days Later

However, six days after Peter's Confession Jesus takes His inner circle of disciples, Peter, James and John, up a mountain to experience a truly awesome event; a glorious sight, one that we can barely imagine.

At Peter's Confession, Jesus had asked His disciples who they believed Him to be -Peter answered, 'the Christ, the Son of the Living God' (Matt 17:16). Now, here on this mountain top, Jesus is going to show them the truth of that confession, with a physical demonstration – Jesus is going to show the disciples His true appearance as the Son of God. And so, right there on that mountain, Jesus is transfigured before their very eyes. Quite literally His appearance changes; and they see standing before them a being of astonishing glory; a man yes, but so much more than that. They see Him as He really is - the Son of Living God; the Second Person of the Trinity. Peter, tells us in his second letter, that:

"...we were eye-witnesses of his majesty." (2 Pet 1:16).

The Law and the Prophets

Any lingering doubts they may have had about Jesus were completely blown away. Furthermore, standing right there with Jesus were two others: Moses and Elijah. Moses representing the Law, and Elijah the Prophets. The point being that they both take second place to Jesus, because the prophets and the law both testified to Jesus, and prepared the way for Him. And Jesus of course, is the fulfilment of the both the Law and the Prophets. So the disciples then are in the presence of one far greater than Elijah, greater even than Moses.

Then finally, just in case the disciples were still in any doubt about who Jesus really is, we have the Father Himself, speaking from heaven. Mark tells us that a cloud appears and envelopes them, and a voice declares:

"This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"(Mark9:7)

Peter also mentions this in his second letter, too (see 2 Pet 1:17f).

Deeper Purpose

But is there a deeper purpose to this act of Transfiguration? We've already mentioned that it was to underline Jesus' true identity as the Messiah, but is there more to it than that? I believe there is. Following Peter's Confession, Jesus also told the disciples that He would be handed over to the gentiles and crucified, and three days later rise from the dead, but they hadn't really understood what He was talking about.

The fact is the disciples will soon be caught up in a series of terrible events, and will witness the arrest, suffering and crucifixion of Jesus. So the Lord is now doing what He can to prepare them for that: one last mountain top experience before they have to endure the valley of the shadow of death. This amazing experience will help prepare them for what is to come; help them to have the faith they will most definitely need to carry them through those difficult times when they will no-longer have the earthly presence of Jesus with them.

Lent

Now that's fine for the disciples, but what about us? We haven't witnessed the sight of Jesus transfigured in glory on the mountain top. We haven't seen Elijah and Moses or heard the voice of the Father -so how can we apply this to our lives?

Well, in many ways it's like the rest of the gospel events - we accept them as a true and reliable eyewitness account of an actual historical event, recorded for our benefit; and we can take heart from that. Even though we weren't there ourselves, we can certainly take great encouragement from the truth of these events, to help us prepare ourselves for the season of Lent.

This coming Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent. During the season of Lent the church remembers how the opposition to Jesus intensified; how He was rejected; how people turned away from Him because the teaching was too hard, too unbelievable. And during Holy Week, the final week of Lent, we remember how He was arrested, suffered and finally put to death by crucifixion.

So during these next six weeks then, our Lenten journey is going to be a journey with Jesus, as He endures the most terrible ordeal that will end with the Cross. This mountain-top experience we hear about today then, helps us prepare ourselves for our own journey with Jesus through Lent.

Fellow Traveller

It also prepares us for something else too – our own personal times of darkness and difficulty. As we recall how Jesus shone with glory and splendour, remember it was recorded for our benefit, to

deepen our faith, so that we can endure the low points in our own lives. As we walk with Jesus in our own life of discipleship, with all its ups and downs, we can be assured that He is with us on that journey, walking alongside – not just another fellow traveller, but the very Son of God Himself is our companion on the journey of life. The Transfiguration is a powerful reminder to us of just who it is that we serve, and who it is that upholds and protects us on our journey of faith. Amen.