

**St. Ninian's Parish Church**  
**Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2020**  
*Matthew 17: 1 - 9*

'Isn't it good that I am here ... this is what I think we should do – with your permission of course ...'<sup>1</sup>

That's Peter in the Gospel reading this morning, saying to Jesus – 'Isn't it good that I am here!' So often Peter blunders ahead, says the wrong thing, makes promises he can't keep, big announcements and then has to backtrack. Here he is at it again. The three disciples on a mountain see a vision of Jesus transfigured by light, and a vision of Moses symbolising the Law, and Elijah symbolising the prophets.

Jesus, transfigured by a glorious light, Moses and Elijah present, and Peter's immediate reaction is not awe, wonder, terror, or even thoughtfulness. No, he just blunders ahead. Never mind Jesus transfigured, or Elijah, or Moses; isn't it good that *I* am here, he announces. He goes on. This is what we should do, he says, let's build three booths.

Who is he like? He is like your relative, perhaps your brother or sister, who turns up at the family event after you have done all the organising, and preparation, and hard work, and who struts around as if to say, now the party can begin because I'm here.

Who is Peter like? He's like the detective in that TV crime drama where there has been a murder in a remote, local community, and the police send in the big shot from the big city to take over because they don't trust the local PC to investigate. The big shot detective turns up with a fanfare – isn't it good I am here - and does his thing, but in the end it's the local PC who solves the case in the background.

In the crime drama, that is really where the drama is. It's not in the murder, or the whodunnit, but in the tension between the characters. The story is really about the local PC and the hotshot detective.

The Transfiguration is like that. The drama doesn't lie in Jesus shinning with a glorious light, or in the appearance of the two Old Testament characters, the story is really about the disciples, Peter, James and John. The important thing to notice is not what happens to Jesus, or who appears beside him, or even the voice of God, the important thing to notice is what happens to the disciples.

It is important to notice what happens to them, what they do and what they say in this transfiguration story because they are us. They are disciples. They represent us. Peter, James and John are you and me and everyone here.

Peter seeing Jesus transfigured, Peter, full of himself, isn't even finished speaking when God's breaks in. 'While he was still speaking ... a voice called from the cloud.'<sup>2</sup> A voice interrupted from the cloud. It is God's voice. What is *that* like? It is a bit like your brother, or your sister, or that relative who turns up at the party at the last minute after all the work of preparation has been done strutting around like they own the place, then being cut down to size by a few well-chosen words from the family matriarch.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 17:4

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 17: 5

It's a bit like at work when that person who thinks he is the big shot is opining in the meeting, and the chief executive walks in and she cuts right through them. Peter is still speaking when God's voice booms out, cutting right through Peter, and sending him and his friends to their knees in terror.

'This is my Son, my Beloved, on whom my favour rests; listen to him,' booms God as Peter witters on. It's as if God was watching this whole scene unfold, fully expecting the disciples to get the message when they see Jesus transfigured and the two Old Testament characters appear. Then, listening to Peter, God realises that despite this amazing vision of Jesus, Peter and the disciples don't get it, and that he, God the Father, has to intervene, interrupt impatiently with a booming tone of angry frustration. What is *that* like?

I know what that is like, because I'm a bit like that at home sometimes, as a father, 'Just stop doing that and listen to your mother!' It's a bit terrifying. Sarah is then the one who is a bit like Jesus, the one who after the father's booming outburst comforts the disciples, touching them, saying, 'Stand up; don't be afraid.'

Now, in this story we have reached the important point of transformation that has occurred on this hilltop, and it isn't the transfiguration of Jesus, or the vision of Moses and Elijah, or the booming voice of God, it occurs after Jesus has touched the disciples and told them not to be afraid, Matthew says,

'And when the disciples raised their eyes they saw no one, but only Jesus.'<sup>3</sup>

'This is my Son, my beloved, on whom my favour rests; listen to him,' said God. They listened to him, and he said, 'Stand up; do not be afraid.' And then they saw him, and only him. That was what was meant to happen right at the very beginning of the story, and you would have thought that is what would have happened right at the very beginning of the story with the shining light and the ancient Old Testament characters standing there.

'... in their presence Jesus was transfigured; his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light.' You would think that this vision would have been enough for the disciples to focus their attention on Jesus. But, it wasn't – because they and we are not like that.

They and we are far too full of our own importance. The most important person in the room right now is not you. Nor is it those who are reading from the Bible, or preaching from the pulpit, or playing the organ, or singing in the choir; not you, not them, not anyone else is the most important person in the room at the moment. The most important person in the room at the moment is Jesus Christ, who is here in Spirit – when we are gathered together his Holy Spirit is present – and who is here in the Word that we read, the Bible. If we were celebrating communion he would be here too in bread and wine.

So, stop thinking about yourself, or about how well the Bible is read, the sermon preached, or the anthem sung, they are distractions. Put your fears aside, those that you brought here with you. These fears and worries are important of course, but don't look at them just now, in this hour, in this place, for they will definitely distract you. We are here to worship God through Jesus Christ, and it is him you need to listen to and see and taste and touch and speak about, and perhaps, like the woman who anointed him with rich perfume, smell.

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew 17: 8

But why, why do you need to see him and not yourself? Why did Peter need to see Jesus and not himself? Because things from this point on are going to get a bit rough. They don't fully appreciate it, although we know it, but the disciples haven't yet realised that it is from this point that Jesus starts his journey to Jerusalem where he will be crucified. Life is going to start growing dark, very dark. Lent for us begins this coming week and in the weeks to come we will climb up to Jerusalem with Jesus, and descend into the darkness with him, as he is raised up on the cross.

When life is hard, the road rocky, the pain increasing, the darkness coming, you need to find a way through, a light to follow. You need to have confidence that this way is the way you need to take, this road is the one you need to follow. You need to know that on this road you are loved, that you are not alone, that you are with the right person, that help is at hand. The disciples needed to know it, and so do we.

After all, the Jesus they knew up to this point was not this Jesus. Up to this point he was to them a healer, a teacher, a man concerned for the marginalised, a holy man, a leader who drew people together to get things done, perhaps a disrupter. But, from this point on that will change: his healing won't just repair what is broken, but signal a change to the social order; his teaching will become more challenging and confrontational; his leadership will become sacrificial; he will speak of his death; his followers will start to leave.

But he will not going to run away in the face of corrupt power that wants to oppress others and enrich itself. He will not run away from those who, because of – as Matthew says later – the wonderful things that he did<sup>4</sup>, want to put him to death.

To walk the road with this man will require conviction and courage from these disciples. They, and we will have to keep our eyes on him otherwise we will melt with fear, fall behind, wander off – and then we'll be lost, in this life of ours.

This event on the mountain top was meant to give those disciples that focus on courage and that conviction that Jesus was the one to keep your eyes on unless you wander off in to the rough pasture, lost. It was for them the vision took place, so that on this journey to the cross and then to the resurrection they would listen to Jesus, as God commanded and see him – only him.<sup>5</sup>

Over the next six weeks we will be on this journey as well. Over the past six weeks we have read through Paul's first letter to the members of the church in Corinth who had taken their eyes of Jesus Christ and followed instead different leaders. Their church had been reduced to squabbling and in-fighting.

So, over the next six weeks of Lent we will hear the key part of Jesus story: his journey to Jerusalem, his death and then at Easter his resurrection. We'll learn that true love for others and for God is sacrificial. Complete and absolute love of the sort that only God can give is sacrificial to the point of death. But, this glorious love cannot be destroyed even by those who would do so, it shines on, it lives on in the lives of those who are prepared to carry on, following him with their eyes fixed on him, to the grave and beyond.

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew 21: 15

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 17: 8