

MATTHEW 17:1-9 ST JOHN'S, 23.2.20, 9.30 am

INTRODUCTION

It feels as if we've had another ride in the TARDIS since last week!

Last Sunday we heard Jesus' command in the Sermon on the Mount *not [to] be anxious about . . . what [we] will eat or what [we] will drink, nor about . . . what we will put on*, but instead to make our relationship with God our first priority. Today, we're on top of another mountain, over a year later, watching Jesus' face shining *like the sun* and his clothes become *white as light*.

A few weeks further back, we were amongst the crowds of people beside the river Jordan, just as Jesus was coming to be baptised. That was another occasion when a voice spoke from heaven. The words spoken were exactly the same as the voice from the cloud in today's story: *This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased* (v 5). This time the voice has something extra to add: *listen to him!*

Since then, we've been reading about the early days of Jesus' ministry, following on from his Baptism. Today's sudden jump means we've skipped over the rest of Matthew's account of Jesus' public ministry in Galilee. And we've skipped over Peter's blinding flash of inspiration in chapter 16, when he declares, *You are the Christ, the Son of the living God* (16:16). *From that time* (16:21), Jesus focuses his teaching on the disciples in private. Now that they've grasped who he is, he needs them at least to begin to grasp that he *must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things . . . be killed and on the third day be raised* (16:21). The

events on the *high mountain*, six days later, are part of that teaching, as Jesus prepares his disciples for the events to come a few months later in Jerusalem.

WHO IS THIS JESUS?

It's very striking that Jesus starts to teach his disciples about what awaits him in Jerusalem as soon as Peter has identified him as *Christ* and *Son of the living God*. Two different aspects of Jesus' identity are emphasized through the rest of chapter 16, and in this vision. Firstly, Jesus is seen as *the Christ, the Son of the living God* (16:16), who's *going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father* (16:27) . . . *as King* (16:28). This is the Jesus whose face is shining *like the sun*, and his *clothes* are *white as light* (17:2). This Jesus is proclaimed by a voice from a bright cloud to be *my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased* (17:5).

Secondly, Jesus is seen as the one who *must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things . . . who will be killed* (16:21). This is the Jesus who tells his disciples: *If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me* (16:24). This Jesus is left behind, while Moses and Elijah return to heaven. This Jesus has to come *down the mountain* (17:9), and face what lies before him.

The voice coming from the cloud proclaims both these aspects of Jesus' identity and mission to be true and valid. He is indeed God's *beloved Son* (v 5) – or as Peter put it in chapter 16, *the Christ, the Son of the living God*. He's also the Suffering Servant prophesied by Isaiah – as I pointed out when we thought about these same words at Jesus'

Baptism, the second part, *with whom I am well pleased*, is a reference to Isaiah's Servant Songs. Jesus is both the glorious Lord of lords and King of kings, and the glorious Suffering Servant, the crucified Saviour. On the one hand, he's never surrendered the glory he had with the Father before the world began. On the other hand, he's chosen to surrender that glory, and he'll only regain it as he dies in shameful agony on a cross outside Jerusalem.

In fact, the scene at the transfiguration . . . offers a strange parallel and contrast to the crucifixion (Matthew 27:33-54) . . . Here, on a mountain, is Jesus, revealed in glory; there, on a hill outside Jerusalem, is Jesus, revealed in shame. Here his clothes are shining white; there they have been stripped off, and soldiers have gambled for them. Here he is flanked by Moses and Elijah, two of Israel's greatest heroes, representing the law and the prophets; there, he is flanked by two brigands, representing the level to which Israel had sunk in rebellion against God. Here, a bright cloud overshadows the scene; there, darkness comes upon the land. Here Peter blurts out how wonderful it all is; there, he is hiding in shame after denying he even knows Jesus. Here a voice from God himself declares that this is his wonderful son; there a pagan soldier declares, in surprise, that this really was God's son.¹

In other words, the transfiguration and the crucifixion explain each other. We can't understand one without the other.

The heavenly voice has something extra to add to the words about Jesus at his Baptism. *Listen to him!* As Peter's already shown, once Jesus' followers realise that he's *the Christ, the son of the living God*, it's very difficult for them to hear what he says about his own suffering and death (16:22). No doubt all the disciples also found it difficult to hear Jesus' words about their own life as his followers: *If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me* (16:24). But the words from the cloud confirm that no matter how crazy it might seem, Jesus is right to point out that the Kingdom of heaven can only be established by service, by suffering, and by sacrifice.

The words, *Listen to him!* also point us to another aspect of Jesus' identity. They echo a prophecy of Moses in Deuteronomy, *The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you – it is to him you shall listen* (Deuteronomy 18:15). The Jews were still looking for this prophet like Moses; the voice from the cloud confirms that in Jesus, he's arrived.

CONCLUSION

It's always tempting to bypass the cross! How many believers attend church to celebrate Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, and to celebrate his Resurrection on Easter Day, but don't come on Good Friday to remember the cross? How many believers are swept up in heady excitement by preachers who focus on victory and healing and prosperity? Preachers who conveniently forget that

we serve a crucified Lord, who calls us to *deny self, take up [our cross], and follow [him]* along the road of service, suffering and sacrifice.

Bypassing the cross is a temptation we share with our Lord. When he tempted Jesus in the wilderness, Satan tried very hard to deflect him from the road of service, suffering and sacrifice (Matthew 4:1-11).

When Peter protested that Jesus must never be put to death, Jesus had to resist temptation again: *Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me . . .* (Matthew 16:22-23). Again, in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus asked his Father to *let this cup pass from me* (Matthew 26:39).

Jesus could have chosen another road at almost any time. But he refused to give in to the temptation. He knew that he had to follow that road of service, suffering and sacrifice to its bitter end if he was going to accomplish the mission on which he'd come into the world. The Transfiguration must have been an encouragement to him. It confirmed that he was on the right road. It also showed Peter and the rest that they were wrong to protest against it, and gave them a momentary glimpse behind the scenes, a glimpse of Jesus' heavenly glory, before facing all that was to come.

If we're to follow our Lord faithfully, we too have to tread that road of service, suffering and sacrifice. There are no short-cuts! We must *deny self, take up [our cross], and follow* Jesus. Yes, we'll receive

encouragements along the way. There'll be times when we'll glimpse the heavenly glory to come. Strength and encouragement for our journey are only ever a prayer away. And we know that the day will come when, like Jesus at the Transfiguration, we *will shine like the sun in the kingdom of [our] Father* (Matthew 13:43).

¹ Tom Wright, Matthew for Everyone Part 2, second edition (London, SPCK, 2004), p 14