

“GLORY BE! (Mark 31)”
Mark 9:2-13

Five years ago last week, as some of you may remember, I was away in Israel taking part in a sponsored cycle ride around the north of the country to raise funds for a hospital. On the last day, as we prepared for the final run up to Nazareth, where the hospital was located, some of us cycled up Mount Tabor. That mountain is the traditional site of the story we’ve just read. It’s actually highly unlikely that it is the actual site, for all kinds of reason which I won’t go into this morning, but it was a pretty gruelling ride up nearly two thousand feet of hairpin bends and stunning views. Of course, it was also pretty hair-raising as no motor vehicles were allowed up the road apart from registered taxis, most of which appeared to be battered Mercedes, full of nuns and driven by homicidal maniacs.

The sun was merciless and there was very little shade on the way up (or, indeed, down), but we were looking forward to the prospect of sitting in the cool of the little monastery at the top. Alas, when we finally arrived, we were refused entry to the monastery complex because we were wearing shorts. (Although I seem to remember a number of us shared a pair of trousers and took it in turns to go inside.) You can imagine, I’m sure, that by the time we arrived, sweating and panting, at the gates of the Monastery of the Transfiguration, our faces were well and truly glowing.

Not, however, like the face of Jesus. He and his disciples may well have been a bit puffed when they reached the top of whichever mountain it actually was (Mount Hermon is the favourite, for those of you who really want to know), but the glow on the face of Jesus was a supernatural one. The story Mark records here in his account of the life and ministry of Jesus is a story that is very special, the story of an encounter which has great implications both for the unfolding account of the good news which Jesus brings – good news of the inauguration of the new Kingdom foretold by the Hebrew prophets – and for those who want to take seriously what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ today.

There are all kinds of suggestions as to what is going on in this episode and different scholars have put forward a number of different theories as to what Mark has written here and why he’s written it. Some would argue that this didn’t really happen and is simply a resurrection appearance story that is read back into the life of Jesus by Mark at a later date. Others want to suggest that this is merely a symbolic legend – something happened, but not in the way Mark records it, although we can learn something from it. And others – and I believe this too – say that Mark is faithfully recording something that did actually happen and he has included it in his book because it has something particular to tell us about Jesus and about what his mission was.

This is the report of an incident in the life of Jesus and it does indeed have something to tell us today. There is a strong element of the supernatural about it – and there’s no reason at all to deny that. But what are the clues as to the supernatural nature of this event? What does Mark include that leads us to believe that there’s something very special going on here?

Firstly, this takes place on the top of a mountain. In the tradition of God’s people, that’s the place for an encounter with God, very often. To take just two examples, Moses met with God on Mount Horeb in the Sinai desert and it was there that God gave him the Ten Commandments and the laws that were to govern the life of his people Israel, the *Torah*. And Elijah (along with a large number of other people) had an encounter with God on Mount Carmel as he took on the prophets of Baal (*1 Kings 18*). Jesus himself often went up into the mountains to pray and delivered his most memorable sermon on the mountain.

The meeting between Moses and God also links in with the second clue. Mark says that this happened “*after six days*”. If you’ve been looking closely at this story as Mark writes it, you’ll notice that that’s very unusual for him. He is rarely that specific in the way in which he links one passage to another. But

the mention of six days here very probably refers back to the fact that Moses met with God after waiting six days when he went up Mount Horeb (*Exodus 21:16*).

Then there's the appearance of Moses and Elijah. For two people who had been long dead to appear is not exactly what you'd expect, is it? (I wonder how the disciples recognised them: maybe they heard Jesus address them by name.) But these two men also ended their lives on earth in strange circumstances: Elijah was taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire and Moses apparently died, but he had no known grave, leading to the tradition amongst the Jews that he too was taken directly up to heaven.

Fourthly, Mark tells us that Jesus' clothes "*became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them.*" You can keep your Daz and your Persil and your Bold – this is a white that is just impossible, even with Danny Baker and a box of soap powder on your doorstep. Clearly Mark is wanting to emphasise the fact that this is no humanly contrived event. Jesus was glowing.

And finally, the cloud comes down and covers them all. Once again, for the Jewish people, the presence of God was often signified by a cloud. It was a cloud that led the Hebrew across the desert from Egypt to the land God had promised them. When the Tabernacle – the temporary place of worship that the people used out there in the desert – was completed, the presence of God was signified by a cloud (*Exodus 40:34-38*). When the Temple in Jerusalem was dedicated by Solomon, the same thing happened (*1 Kings 8:10-13*).

All these little clues point to this being a supernatural event, one in which God was clearly involved. As Mark's first Jewish readers read these words, all kinds of bells would have been ringing in their heads. And in this supernatural event we have yet another glimpse of the Kingdom of God. You'll remember, I hope, that throughout this gospel of Mark we have been given glimpses of this Kingdom – a renewed and restored creation, a world just as God originally intended it to be before sin and evil affected it. We have seen Jesus preaching this radical new message, that the world would one day be as the Hebrew prophets had foretold, a world without pain and suffering, where the forces of evil no longer held sway, where nature was permanently in subjection to the sovereign will of God. And he has demonstrated what the Kingdom could be like by healing, exorcising, performing miracles, restoring a sense of dignity and humanity to the marginalized and outcasts.

And in this short glimpse into the Kingdom we see what it will be like when God's glory is reflected without interference in the bodies of those who are part of it all. Jesus glows with the radiance of the Father. He is "*transfigured*" before them. The word in Greek is "*metamorphēin*", from which we get our word "metamorphosis". It occurs a couple more times in the New Testament, both in places where Paul is writing about the ways in which we will be changed to be more like Jesus (*Romans 12:2* and *2 Corinthians 3:18*). In the fulfilled Kingdom of God, those who have followed Jesus will shine as he does with the glory of God the Father.

And Peter thinks that this is it! It's all happening. The Kingdom has finally arrived and everything has reached its climax. He wants to settle down, to freeze the moment, to capture the experience and enjoy it for ever. He suggests that they build some shelters. Older translations have "*booths*" and it's a link to the Jewish festival of Succoth, the time when the liberation of the people of Israel and their provision by God are celebrated by the building of little booths. God has liberated his people, the Kingdom has finally arrived, thinks Peter, so let's get on and celebrate: let's just enjoy the moment and make it last.

But, as we know, the Kingdom hasn't yet been fulfilled. Mark makes it clear in his editorial comment that Peter's intervention here is quite inappropriate (v6). There is still work to be done. There is still suffering to undergo and sacrifices to be made. There is still death to deal with, as Jesus makes clear on the way back down the mountain (vv9.10). There are no short cuts to the fulfilment of the Kingdom – whether for Jesus or for his followers (as we saw in the last passage). This episode is here to show that God wanted to correct the misapprehensions of Jesus' followers. It's here to ensure that we don't get the

wrong end of the stick about who Jesus is and what he came to do. Throughout Mark's account of this event, everything is directed at the three disciples – “before **them** ... before **them** ... enveloped **them** ...” The voice of God speaks to **them**. So what are we to learn from it all?

Firstly, if there were any lingering doubts in anyone's mind, Jesus is not just another figure in the long line of Old Testament servants of God. Well, we know that, don't we? We have our Bible helpfully divided up into the two testaments to emphasise the change, but these disciples didn't. There was still the idea in the minds of many (as we read in 8:28) that Jesus was just another of the prophets. And that's still the idea many people have today – a good teacher, a great philosopher, a prophet (as followers of Islam would say), a special human being (as the Jehovah's Witnesses would say). But as he appears there with Moses and Elijah, it's clear that he is not just like them. They disappear. He remains. Jesus is different – he is greater. He is eternal.

So why are Moses and Elijah there, then? Simply to show that Jesus isn't quite like them? Well, it's more than that. These two figures are there for a specific purpose, not just for comparison. As we've already said, they are two men (along with Enoch) who were believed by the Jewish people not to have died a natural death (*Deuteronomy 34:6*; *2 Kings 2:11*). They were also two men who were expected to show up again before the fulfilment of the Kingdom was complete. They were kind of harbingers of the Messiah. There's mention of that in the little book of *Malachi* at the end of the Old Testament. But they are particularly included here, I would suggest, because they are symbolic of the Law (Moses) and the Prophets (Elijah). That was the foundation of the religion of the Jewish people and they stand for the great tradition of rules and regulations and scholarship on which the contemporary upholders of the Jewish faith built their reputation and power.

Again, as we've seen, Jesus has come to declare that such rules and regulations are inadequate as a means of gaining entry to the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is not about a slavish adherence to lists of dietary laws and matters of social and religious etiquette. It's about relationship to Jesus, about renewed agendas for living our lives, about enjoying the things God has to offer now with a hope of even better things to come in the future. There's no doubt that the Law and the Prophets had a place in the life of God's people and they still have a part to play in helping us to understand something of God's plan today. (Paul makes that point very clearly in his letter to the *Galatians*.) And Jesus stood unashamedly within that tradition. But he also superseded it. In this amazing experience which the disciples had up there on the mountain, Jesus stood talking to Moses and Elijah – he was acknowledging his link with them. But, again, they disappeared, leaving only Jesus there. The Law and the Prophets are not the main thing any more – Jesus is.

The third lesson to be learned (as we've already hinted at) is that the Kingdom will involve suffering and death. This is just a glimpse of future glories. Before that can come to fruition, Jesus has to suffer rejection and humiliation and death. This experience ends and the disciples follow Jesus back down the mountain, back into the real world, as it were. He has told them already of what he must go through and now he strides off to keep his appointment with that destiny. It's great to have these glimpses of the Kingdom. It's wonderful to encounter Jesus in powerful and uplifting ways – but the Christian life cannot be lived wholly on that plain. Like Jesus, we must also learn to cope with suffering and pain. The Kingdom is coming – no doubt about it – but there are all kinds of things to struggle through on the way. But it doesn't mean that you're a failure when things don't always go the way the cheap paperbacks about the victorious Christian life suggest they should. Jesus had to some extent deflated the hopes of his followers when he had told them the Messiah would suffer and die, but this vision of his glory was a reminder that he was not a failure because of that.

And it taught them, too, that although Jesus would be rejected by human beings, although his radical new agenda would eventually lead to his death, he was still loved by his Father God. If you think back to the baptism of Jesus in *1:11*, you may recall that on that occasion God spoke to Jesus to affirm him in his ministry. Now he speaks directly to the followers of Jesus to confirm to them that Jesus is his Son and

that he loves him. For Peter and James and John – and for the others when they hear about it, and countless others down through the centuries – this is all a bit bewildering. God has sent Jesus into this world with the tremendous message of hope and healing and wholeness, and yet he is intending Jesus to die to ensure that it becomes a reality. What kind of God is that? What kind of father is he? He's a father who loves his son, who wants the very best for him. We may not think he's going about it in the best way. We may have our own human perspective on it all, but God knows what he is doing – and at the heart of it all is love.

And therefore, because Jesus is not just another man (however special that man might be), because he is not just another strand in a tradition (however strong that tradition might have been), because he is by no means a failure (however much we may feel that a humiliating execution is the ultimate sign of failure), because he is not rejected by God but remains very much his dearly loved son (however much we might want to take issue with God's parenting skills!) – because of all these things, there is one more mighty lesson to learn. God said to those cowering, bewildered, awestruck disciples – and through them and Mark's retelling of the story to us – “*Listen to him!*” There is, of course, no exclamation mark in the Greek, but you can sense it hovering above Mark's stylus as he writes.

“This is Jesus, my Son. I love him. I've sent him into your beautiful, messed-up, joyous, distorted, funny, painful world to make a difference, to show you what real life, life in my Kingdom, is all about. He's the only one who truly knows what's going on. He's my mouthpiece. He's your only hope of salvation. Listen to him!” If you're serious about Jesus, then you have to listen to him – to his promises, to his blessings, to his words of encouragement, to his warnings, to his commands, to his words of rebuke and challenge. This is no part-time hobby. This is not some kind of pick'n'mix offer where you can select the bits you like and disregard the bits that don't quite fit with what you want. If you want to listen to and enjoy all the stuff about *shalom* and fulfilment and joy and God's prodigal gift of grace, then you've also got to listen to the things he says in the passage immediately before this about taking up your cross and sacrifice and self-denial.

This word “*listen*” (or “*hear*” as it is in some versions) often has implicit within it a sense of obedience, too. If you hear, you obey. “*He who has ears to hear, let him hear.*” Listen to Jesus and put into practice what he says. If you're in any way serious about all this stuff, you cannot – you **must** not – ignore what he says. Those who want to accept the offer of a place in the Kingdom of God have to take the words of Jesus – **all** the words – very seriously. It's a challenge. It takes some guts. But you can't enjoy the glory without the guts. Are you listening?

Questions for discussion

1. Imagine you are one of the three disciples in this story. Describe the experience.
2. How would you respond to someone who tried to convince you that this did not really happen?
3. How can we believe that God the Father loves Jesus when he sends him to such a humiliating death?
4. We are to “*listen to Jesus*”. Which words of Jesus do you find easiest to listen to? Which words are hardest to listen to?
5. Why can't we spend all our time enjoying “mountain top experiences” with Jesus? (If you think we can, share with everyone else how you manage it!) How do you cope with the valleys?
6. What strikes you as the most important lesson to be learned from this passage?