

“FOLLOWING THE KING – 49”
Matthew 17:1-13

I don't know how many of you were here last Sunday morning at the 11 o'clock service. If you were, I don't think you'll have forgotten it. Pentecost Sunday, a renewal of baptismal vows and a baptism. The church was full, with loads of visitors. The worship was uplifting. There was a great sense of God's presence. And, after Hattie's re-commitment and as Tracy came up from the water and the congregation sang *Oh happy day!*, I don't know about you, but I'd have loved that moment to have gone on for ever. It was as if it was what we'd been put on this earth for!

The singer Van Morrison sums up that moment in a line from one of his songs (which I've quoted before), when he sings:

*I look at the side of your face as the sunlight comes
Streaming through the window in the autumn sunshine
And all the time going to Coney Island I'm thinking
Wouldn't it be great if it was like this all the time*

That last line expresses what many of us often think, I reckon. (Not the bits about autumn sunshine and going to Coney Island, of course!) “*Wouldn't it be great if it was like this all the time?*”. We often seem to have a real desire to hang on to the present – especially when it's a pleasant present. Our humanity is lived in that tension which is the present, a tension between where we've been (the past) and where we're going (the future).

Whatever stage of life we are at, there is the constant desire to look back to what we have enjoyed in the past, so many experiences that we find comforting as we look at them through the rose-tinted lenses of nostalgia. And we're always looking forward, too – looking forward with eager anticipation, maybe fantasising about what we hope will happen: or looking forward with apprehension to things which we fear, which cause us anxiety and distress. We find ourselves, individually and collectively, caught between tradition and movement, between the status quo and the possibilities.

But, if it's going well, it is in the present that we often find our security. When we are having a good time, we don't want it to end. We want to stay here and now – “*Wouldn't it be great if it was like this all the time?*” And that's basically what Peter is saying here in this story of the transfiguration, the glorification of Jesus Christ. He wants to hang on to it – not just to savour it, but to make time stand still and never to have to worry about what is still to come; to freeze the present for ever.

Here's Jesus – a week or so after the occasion when Peter has correctly identified Jesus as the Kingly Messiah, the Christ, the Chosen and Anointed One, predicted by the faithful Hebrew prophets, preachers and poets of the Old Testament. Jesus has taken his closest friends, Peter, James and John up a mountain

in private. And while they are up there, something very unusual happens. Suddenly, God's glory bursts forth. Jesus' face changes and his clothes become dazzling white, "*white as the light*". It must have been some sight, especially if it was night time (as is suggested by the other Gospel writers' accounts). It is a revelation of the deity, the divinity, the God-ness of Jesus.

And as Jesus stands there, radiant in his Godly glory, he is joined by two other figures – Moses and Elijah, who are also bathed in glorious splendour. Why these two men? we might ask. Well, the usual answer is that these two great Old Testament figures represent the past which Jesus has come to fulfil: Moses the Lawgiver and Elijah the Prophet. They are here to demonstrate that Jesus is continuing the heritage of the Old Testament – the Law and the Prophets" – but making it gloriously new at the same time. But there are all kinds of associations which each man has in Jewish thought.

Moses had a mountaintop experience at Sinai. His face shone as he reflected the glory of the Lord (*Exodus 34:30; 2 Corinthians 3:7*). Moses was not only a lawgiver, but also a prophet – indeed, he was a prototype (if we can use that word) of Jesus himself. Elijah was not only a prophet, but he also related to the law of Moses as symbolising the one who would one day turn people's hearts back to the covenant (*Malachi 4:4-6*). Elijah in Jewish thought was an eschatological figure – a prophet associated with the end times. So rather than looking at both these figures as representing the past and tradition and what had gone before, we can see them as representing the past and the future.

Moses, you see, is a typological figure who reminds us of the past. And he was a predecessor of the Messiah. Elijah is an eschatological figure, who points beyond Jesus to the future resolution of all things, the fulfilment of the Kingdom of God. Jesus stands between them, the bridge from the past to the future, the eternally existing present.

We'll come back to that in a moment, but let's just note a couple of other things about Moses and Elijah while we are on the subject. These two men are among the most highly respected Old Testament figures, and those whom the people sometimes expected to return to Israel. But they had one very distinctive thing in common – which may well have led to the popular expectation that they would one day make a reappearance. They both had a strange departure from this world. Elijah was taken up to heaven in a whirlwind (*2 Kings 2:11*), and Moses was buried by the Lord himself (*Deuteronomy 34:6*).

Anyway, Jesus is caught in that tension between the past and the future. He is there between Moses and Elijah, needing to move on from the Law – the tradition of the past – and to go on into the future. But at the moment it is wonderful – the past has gone, the future has not yet happened: "*Wouldn't it be great if it was like this all the time?*"

And, as we've already said, that's just how Peter feels. He doesn't understand what's going on – he's only just woken up (according to Luke's version). But he wants to capture the moment by putting up three shelters. Wouldn't it be great, eh? The two greatest figures of Jewish history and faith, and the newly affirmed Messiah – all three of them staying with you in a little booth for ever! We don't know how explicit the conversation was between the three men (v3), or how much Peter actually heard of it, but there's a sense here once again that Peter is trying to prevent Jesus moving forward along the path of suffering, another opportunity to divert Jesus from the road to the cross.

What had not struck me until I was looking at the three gospel accounts of the Transfiguration in preparation for this was that Jesus does not reply. I suppose I'd always had somewhere in my mind the idea that Jesus rebuked Peter – as he did in so many other places. But the response comes not from the Son, it comes from the Father. A cloud comes down, "*while he was still speaking*" (v5), and envelops them. Once again, there is a great deal of association here, particularly in the Jewish mind, with the Old Testament. The cloud is the sign of God's glorious presence. When God came down to his people – on Sinai, in the Tabernacle, at the dedication of the Temple – it was signified by a cloud. And on this occasion, from that cloud comes a voice. God speaks to the disciples!

What God says reaffirms that this is his Son. It's another key turning point in the mission of Jesus – as his baptism marked the beginning of his ministry, so he is now setting out towards Jerusalem and the sacrifice that will redeem the world. "*This is my Son,*" says God. His deity is emphasised and affirmed. But he is the Son "*whom I love*". This is the One who has been set apart, the anointed One, the Messiah. God the Father is setting his seal on the confession that Peter has recently made.

But, as we saw last time we looked into Matthew's Gospel, recognising Jesus as the Christ also has implications. Here it means that Peter and the followers of Jesus must "*listen to him*". Peter and the others need to listen to Jesus, to begin thinking in new ways, to recognise that the glorious present of this moment needs to give way to the future of God's unfolding will. This is, as one writer (Walter Liefeld *Exp Bib Comm*) puts it: "*not only a command; it is correction of the human tendency to substitute human opinion for divine revelation.*" God – God himself – is saying that Jesus is someone who must be listened to, and believed.

The message of the divine voice is perhaps the main point of this whole story. Of course, it says things about the relationship of Jesus to the Old Testament and to the past. Of course, it makes reference to the future. But whether we see it in relationship to the exodus or the second coming, the focus throughout this episode is on the supreme person and glory of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Kingly Messiah.

And then, “*When the disciples heard this*” (v6), the disciples find that Jesus is alone and the visible glory seems to have disappeared. He is, indeed, “*the One*”, because as the terrified disciples rub their eyes and get to their feet, they find that Jesus is alone. The Kingly Messiah is the only one who matters now. He is to be the focus of attention for his followers. He is the central character in human history. He is the one who has come to inaugurate the Kingdom and begin to restore things to the way God originally wanted them to be.

However, the supernatural wonder of the experience has gone, despite Peter’s wish to try and capture it permanently. As we shall see next time, they come down from the mountain to a scene of apparent failure and great human suffering. The “mountaintop” experience has gone and they are down in the valley again. “*Wouldn’t it be great if it was like this all the time?*” Yes, but it can’t be – alas! Life goes on and it is full of ups and downs, even for those who are following the Kingly Messiah.

But Jesus is still with them. The glory may have gone: the exhilaration may have gone: the experience is now just a memory. But Jesus is there. Now, it goes without saying that this episode teaches us a great deal about the glorification of Jesus and the affirmation of his divine sonship and his Messiahship. But it also encourages, I hope, to see that Jesus is always there for us, even when we are not feeling particularly high on experience. We need the occasional glimpse of Christ’s glory, and it’s good to enjoy those experiences. But we also need the assurance of knowing that Jesus is there for us in the present.

We might be able to look back to the past and remember times when he was especially close. We may always be looking forward to the future when our experience of Jesus will, we believe, be so much more glorious. But here and now, Jesus is with us to help us cope with the present. He moves us from the past to the future, helps us through the things that are happening now – be they good or ill. He moves us through the suffering to the eternal glory that awaits us. In that tension between past and future which we call the present, there is Jesus. There to help, to guide, to heal, to encourage, to challenge – but there, and the bread and wine we are going to share in a few moments is a reminder of that.

And we have to keep moving on – we cannot remain stuck in the present, however good it might seem, either. We cannot stop and build shelters to capture the moment and thus avoid the hardships ahead. It would be great if we could. But with Jesus we can look beyond the difficulties (real or imagined) to an eternal future where not only Jesus reflects the transcendent glory of God the Father – but we do too. Don’t get hung up on the present – this is Jesus, God’s own Son. Listen to him!

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And Peter and the followers of Jesus must *"listen to him"*. They must begin thinking in new ways, and recognise that the glorious present of this moment needs to give way to the future of God's unfolding will. Then Jesus is alone and the visible glory seems to have disappeared. The Kingly Messiah is the only one who matters now. He is to be the focus of attention for his followers. Jesus is still with them. The glory may have gone: the exhilaration may have gone: the experience is now just a memory. But Jesus is there. We need the occasional glimpse of Christ's glory, and it's good to enjoy those experiences. But we also need the assurance of knowing that Jesus is there for us in the present.

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?