

REFLECTION

Seeing in a new light

The story of the Transfiguration is found in the three synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke. As usual the story is slightly different in each version, tailored to each gospel writers' audience. Details differ but the essential story is the same.

We all know the story –

Jesus takes Peter, James and John and leads them up a high mountain.

There, in front of their eyes, Jesus is transformed.

- his clothes become dazzling white
- the disciples see Elijah and Moses, also transformed, talking with Jesus
- as they are leaving, Peter rushes in, trying to hang on to what he has seen by suggesting they build three dwellings, one for each of them
- a cloud overshadows them and they hear a voice saying, 'This is my son, my beloved; listen to him.'
- suddenly they look around and there is no one with them anymore
- Jesus orders them to tell no-one about the vision (you could say, 'who would believe them anyway!')

The story of the transfiguration serves to establish Jesus' divinity, his unique relationship with God (like the relationship Moses and Elijah has with God. One of the major dynamics of this story is that all of the memories associated with Moses and Elijah are brought into the story of Jesus. Jesus' transformation is thereby connected to the transformations of Moses (standing for the Law) and Elijah (standing for the Prophets). What actually happened on the mountain is anyone's guess. It is the experience that is real.

Let's look a little more closely at the story.

SIX DAYS LATER

The story begins,

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John and led them up a high mountain.

"after six days" reminds the people of their scriptures. It occurs again and again:

Genesis tells us

...after six days, God saw everything that he had made and it was very good... ...and on the seventh day...he rested Genesis 1

When Moses went up Mt Sinai with his assistant Joshua

...the cloud covered the mountain.... for six days... Exodus 24

That beginning, "after six days" also suggests we haven't come in at the beginning of the story. What happened six days earlier? Could it have any bearing on the journey to the mountaintop and on what transpired there?

Six days earlier, Jesus had called the crowd and his disciples and told them that if they wanted to become his followers, they would have to deny themselves and take up their cross and follow him. Those who wanted to save their life would lose it, and those who were willing to lose their life for his sake and for the sake of the gospel, would save it.

And now, *six days later*, here on the top of the mountain we appear to have the opposite of such gloom. Jesus is changed into a figure of dazzling white brightness and two of Israel's superstars are on the scene. This looks like triumph, not defeat; splendour and success, not failure and loss.

THE HIGH MOUNTAIN

Mountains are important in Matthew as places which symbolically bring us close to heaven, the place where heaven and earth meet – the place where God is revealed

The end is seen as a time when what exists in heaven becomes visible. So if you come close to heaven, its radiance will have an impact now.

We could well ask why do men and women go up mountains? Apart from going up to ski down again. Is it because climbing a mountain raises expectations? What will we see when we get to the top and look around? How many temples and churches, abbeys and shrines, are built on high mountains? Does it bring us closer to God?

TRANSFIGURATION / SHINING CLOTHES

At this moment, on this mountain, Jesus' outward appearance is transfigured, his outward appearance is altered in this moment to reveal the glory of God.

The precedent for Jesus' transfiguration and shining clothes comes from Moses' story. Moses' face shines because he has been talking with God. When Moses came down from Mt Sinai, it says,

...the skin of his face shone and (the Israelites) were afraid to come near him Exodus 34

Moses' face shone and, as an echo of this, Jesus' face shines. Links with Moses are important for Matthew because Jesus stands in continuity with the Law and the prophets. He has not come to replace Moses but to bring the authoritative interpretation of the Law given then and of God's will in the present.

In Jesus' story, it is not just his face but also his clothes and everything about him. It's like Moses, but more so.

This story also evokes memories of the stories about Elijah. When he is taken up into heaven, Elijah is standing with Elisha when a fiery chariot with horses separates them. The chariot gathers up Elijah and takes him in a whirlwind up into heaven. II Kings 2.1

After that the spirit of Elijah rested upon Elisha. The implication of this story is that the spirit of Moses and Elijah rests upon Jesus.

MOSES AND ELIJAH

The appearance of Moses and Elijah pertains to the climax of history when Moses and Elijah were expected to reappear.

In Matthew's story, he reverses Mark's description which subordinates Moses to Elijah. Instead of Moses with Elijah (as in Mark) we read Moses and Elijah. Hearers would have had these figures in their memories from the disciples' reports about who people thought Jesus was.

We do this all the time. This establishing ourselves in the history that has brought us to the present time. For example, Barack Obama photographed in the White House with Carter, Clinton and two Bushes. Australian Labour Prime Ministers identify with Bob Hawke and Paul Keating. Liberal Prime Ministers associate themselves with Bob Menzies and John Howard. Sporting stars identify with the greats who have gone before them...

THREE DWELLINGS

Then there is Peter's typical rush to respond to what he is seeing.

Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish I will make three dwellings; one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.

Bill Loader says,

Such dwellings echo the practices of the feast of booths and of the tents of the wilderness. It may evoke the image for us of people wanting to hold onto experiences.

Recognising who Jesus is and listening to him – which clearly implies acting on his words – is far more important than the building of fine houses and the celebration of liturgy. Could this be a dismissal of the church's tendencies toward pomp, ceremony and construction.

THE CLOUD

And then there is the cloud. The cloud is usually seen as a sign of the presence of God

When Moses went up on the mountain, he entered into a cloud, and it was in that cloud that he experienced God. He was in God's presence but God was not seen because he was in the cloud. Exodus 16: 16

THE VOICE OF GOD

In the story of Jesus' transfiguration, the voice of God also comes from the cloud.

Not only the voice from the cloud and its words but also the context of the story connect with the story of Jesus' baptism.

The voice of God instructs the disciples to listen to Jesus.

This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!

The real call is to hear who Jesus is and to "listen to him".

These words may also be echoing the prophecy about the prophet to come after Moses, reported in Deuteronomy 18:15-18, which included the same exhortation: "listen to him!" This may be even more likely in Matthew who is keen on echoes of Moses in his portrait of Jesus.

The voice from heaven then follows, the cloud disappears, and they see only Jesus. Jesus' response to their being overwhelmed is to approach and touch them, encouraging them to rise and not to be afraid.

As Bill Loader says,

In Matthew's story, we have a beautiful image of human beings awed by the divine, but encouraged to stand on their feet and not to fear. It is a moment of profound grace. The meaning of grace we might define as the invitation to stand up and not fear.

COMING DOWN FROM THE MOUNTAIN

When they are coming down from the mountain, Jesus instructs the disciples to tell no one about the event.

As Matthew will show in the next verses (17:10-22) the kingdom and the glory is not to be captured, or maintained, or even be enjoyed by remaining on the mountaintop. The kingdom will be manifested and experienced down in the valley as people are set free.

Have you ever had a "mountaintop experience"?

How did you feel coming down from the mountain?

I invite you to go home and think about it.

We need the mountain top and we need the valley; and if we open our eyes, we can meet God in both places.

Or, as Andrew Prior puts it

Jesus offers us the transformation of our world – or is it that he offers to transfigure us – if we will take up our cross and follow him?