

Romans 13: 8 – end

Matthew 17:1-9

Introduction

The Rectory where I live is on the high Street facing St Mary's Church. From the church steps you can look straight into my bedroom window. So the first thing I did when I moved in was to have a daylight blind fitted. From outside you cannot see in at all, inside the light streams in and the room is light and airy. I can see out but images are misty and unclear. When I open the blind the view is transformed and I see the church in all its beauty.

This must have been a little like the experience of Jesus' disciples in our Gospel reading this morning. They were suddenly confronted with an aspect of Jesus in power, beauty and majesty that they had never imagined he possessed. Their wise and loving, powerful but very human teacher was shown to them in a completely different light

The story of Jesus' transformation or transfiguration as we call it describes what seems to have been an actual event, but an event in which the deepest significance of everyday reality suddenly and overwhelmingly confronted Peter, James and John

It's easy enough, and they themselves must have known this, to dismiss such an experience as a hallucination – albeit a very strange one experienced by several people at the same time. Jewish scriptures and traditions tell us of various events like this, when the veil of ordinariness that normally prevents us from seeing the 'inside' of a situation is drawn back and a fuller reality is disclosed.

Most of us don't have experiences like this, (nor did most early Christians) but unless we allow sceptics to bully us we should be free to believe that this sort of thing really happened to some people – usually completely unexpectedly. And that these

people usually regard it as being hugely important and completely life changing.

Confronted by this extraordinary image Peter blurts out the first thing that comes into his head. " Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters – one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah."

Romans 13: 8 – end

Matthew 17:1-9

The sheer gaucheness and inappropriateness of Peter's comment indicate that this probably is a true event – as so many of the details of the Gospels do. If we were making a story up to make a certain point we wouldn't be likely to put in little details that show us in an unfavourable light. This would surely only happen if the event was true; in fact so firmly etched in Peter's memory that every detail is recounted.

In Mark's Gospel we are told that Jesus had said to his disciples, "Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see that the kingdom of God has come in power"

Jesus has taken them up a mountain and given them a new view of God's kingdom. In the same way that from a mountain top you can see all that lies below in a completely new light. Here on the top of the mountain the three disciples saw God's kingdom in its full glory.

When we are down on the ground we can look and look and never really see.

The disciples are having their eyes opened, so that they can see for the first time the inner reality of God's kingdom, and the central truth that – even though he doesn't appear as they might have expected! – Jesus really is the Messiah.

Jesus takes the disciples up on a high mountain and like the child with a microscope the disciples were able to look for a moment into a different reality, gasp with wonder and ever afterwards see everything differently.

What was the inner reality of Jesus' work? He was continuing and completing the tasks of the great prophet Elijah and behind him, of the greatest prophet of old, Moses himself. Both of them, interestingly, had disappeared from view rather than died in the ordinary way surrounded by their families and friends; legend grew up about their being somehow spared proper death. Now they reappear with the veil of ordinariness drawn back for a moment and Jesus is with them, shining with a brilliant light.

Luke, in his account tells us that they spoke about Jesus' exodus or departure in Jerusalem. His death would be the new Passover; the salvation of his people would be the new exodus. What a fascinating

Romans 13: 8 – end

Matthew 17:1-9

conversation this must have been. In the first Exodus, Moses led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt and home to the Promised Land. In the new Exodus, Jesus will lead God's people out of the slavery of sin and death and home to their promised inheritance – the new creation in which the whole world will be redeemed.

This isn't a revelation of Jesus' divinity; if it were it would make Moses and Elijah divine too which Matthew isn't implying. What this is, is a sign of Jesus being entirely caught up with, bathed in the love and power of the kingdom of God, so that it transforms his whole being with light, in the same way that music transforms words that are sung. This is a sign that Jesus is not just indulging in fantasies about God's kingdom, but that he is speaking and doing the truth. It's the sign that he is indeed the true prophet the Messiah

That too is what the heavenly voice was saying, Jesus is God's special, beloved Son.

Then the vision faded and they descended the mountain and made their way to Jerusalem. But they had been there, they had a glimpse of the glory of God as revealed in Jesus Christ

In his second letter to the Christians in Corinth St Paul says; ¹⁷ *Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.* ¹⁸ *And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.*

Even when the vision faded the disciples had their eyes fixed on looking at Jesus. St Paul goes on to encourage his listeners, " *Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart.*

² *Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God.*

This summer, as we have travelled through Matthews Gospel we have met with Jesus in many different situations and through his teaching. We have seen him tired, grieving, compassionate, angry, impatient; we have seen him teaching his disciples, healing the sick, banishing demons, producing food from very little, exerting power over nature and indulging

Romans 13: 8 – end

Matthew 17:1-9

in banter with some of those who came to see him. We have met him in all his humanity and seen his wisdom and power.

In today's Gospel we have been able to see his glory as well; to glimpse some of the power and majesty of the Kingdom of

God. It is my prayer that having dwelt with Jesus this summer our faith has been energised and renewed, that we have been encouraged to know him more and to serve him daily in all we do and say. My prayer is that having spent the summer with Jesus we will be equipped, as Jesus' disciples were to go out and proclaim the Good News of the kingdom, in our homes, in our communities and where we work and play.

The day before the civil rights campaigner Martin Luther King was killed he said words of encouragement to a large crowd:

"We've got difficult days ahead. But it does not matter to me now. Because I have been to the mountain top, I won't mind. Like anyone else I would like to live a long life But I am not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And he's allowed me to go up the mountain. And I have looked over and seen the Promised Land. So I am happy tonight, I am not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord." Like Martin Luther King if we are to survive the difficult times in which we live we need to have a vision of the glory of our God.