

Transfiguration



*14 Devotional readings for the summer holidays on
the Transfiguration of our Lord Jesus Christ*

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Preface

This set of devotional readings on the Transfiguration were conceived whilst on sabbatical from St Nicholas Sevenoaks wandering around the mountain peaks of the French Alps near Bernex, courtesy of hospitality from our good friends, Paul and Janet Batchelor. They were completed a few weeks later on the Hedley Atkins Ward at Guy's Hospital in London. Perhaps this was as clear a sign as any that holidays aren't supposed to last for ever but more significantly that the lessons learned on the mountain peaks need to be lived out amidst the darkest valleys of our own experiences, in doing so preparing us for our glorious life with Christ in glory.

Dedication

These devotional studies are dedicated to our five grandchildren, Henry, George, Freddie, Phoebe and Rupert with the prayerful hope that as they grow they would encounter the Lord Jesus in all his glory.

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The Transfiguration

Introduction

Pope Callixtus III has a lot to answer for. Most of us won't have ever heard of him before but he was the person responsible for linking the Feast of the Transfiguration to a date in the year when many of us are on holiday. Of course he had his reasons. In 1456 the Muslim Ottoman ruler, having already captured Constantinople a few years earlier, had decided to expand into Christian Europe. In July his forces came to Belgrade, after which most of central Europe would be at his mercy. However the siege of Belgrade was a turning point. Remarkably the defenders were not only able to resist but ultimately mount a successful counterattack. In recognition of this amazing deliverance, the Pope wanted to make a suitable public statement to express thanks to God. I am sure that there were all sorts of options open to him but in his wisdom he decided to commemorate 6 August as the Feast of the Transfiguration. And so, whilst every Christian knows which date to focus on the birth of Christ or His death and resurrection, most years we will skip past one of the key moments relating to the identity of Christ in the church year ... because we're on holiday.

It's the same with the ascension of Christ, always on a Thursday ten days before Pentecost, another neglected

area in our Christian thinking. But at the very least the Ascension is linked firmly with the Resurrection of Christ. Having been raised from the dead, Jesus then ascends to the Father in order that His Spirit will be poured out, before His eventual return. So at least the ascension features within our biblical framework even if it also languishes slightly on the sidelines.

But the Transfiguration of Christ appears to have no particular tie to any other part of the Church year other than the date allocated by Pope Callixtus III. Of course it can be read and studied at any point in any season. It's also true that preachers can select from any of the synoptic gospels or even from 2 Peter 1:16-18 in order to feast on its message whenever they desire. Yet, because there is no fixed date other than in the middle of the annual school summer holidays, these passages tend to have no home and the Transfiguration floats around in our consciousness adrift from everything else. As a consequence it can become neglected with the result that we miss out on the wonders of one of the most precious incidents in the gospels.

So, given that the Feast of the Transfiguration is likely to remain linked to 6 August for the foreseeable future I have a suggestion. Why not make a virtue out of this date falling right in the middle of the school holiday season? Why not focus our holiday devotional times with the Lord on the Transfiguration? If we are fortunate

enough to have two weeks set aside out of our normal routines, how about spending time feeding from this portion of God's word in order to be nourished more and more in our appreciation of the Lord Jesus Christ? What about considering the idea of slowing down in our devotional life in order to savour more of the identity of our Lord Jesus Christ so that, rather than rushing from one passage to the next, we linger with one main passage and explore all the hidden depths that we can?

The fourteen brief explorations which follow are designed to bring this neglected area back into focus. Based primarily on Matthew's version but considering the special insights provided by both Mark and Luke, the aim is to encounter Christ ... the same Christ revealed at the Transfiguration! What a blessing it would be for us to return from our holidays not only physically recharged but also spiritually refreshed, having spent time looking at this Jesus. So even if Pope Callixtus III has unwittingly relegated the Transfiguration into a backwater of church life, let us use the opportunity provided by summer holidays and changes in routine to see the prayer of Paul in Ephesians 1:17 answered so that each of us might 'know Christ better'.

Day 1 : Matthew 16:21-28

Getting our bearings

Introduction

I use satnav but I prefer maps. Of course satnav is a wonderful tool to enable you to get to your holiday destination, provided you spell correctly in order to ensure that you are not directed to a similar sounding place a few hundred miles away. But there is a problem: though satnav can get you there, it doesn't really show you where you are. A good Ordnance Survey map, at least in the hands of someone who knows which way up it should be held, provides the context. It helps to show how the single point of your destination relates to the whole of the surrounding countryside.

It's the same with the Bible. It's great to look at a particular verse or passage. But it will make much more sense when you are able to understand the surroundings. In other words the context will always help to make sense of the text. So, as we prepare to make Matthew 17:1-8 our holiday destination for the next few weeks we are deliberately going to get the map out first and look at the surrounding countryside so that we can see exactly where we are. We'll need to focus on more than a verse or two as we'll want to try to get a good view of the whole area. However, the aim of this first study is not to notice every single detail but to help us get our bearings for Matthew 17:1-8.

Read Matthew 16:21-28

²¹ From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. ²² And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you." ²³ But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."

²⁴ Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

²⁵ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. ²⁶ For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? ²⁷ For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done. ²⁸ Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

‘From that time on ...’ (16:21) introduces a new section within Matthew’s Gospel. The phrase was previously used at 4:17 to introduce Jesus’ public ministry. In getting an overview of Matthew, it is apparent that his first main section 4:17-16:20 focuses on the identity of the Lord Jesus Christ. It culminates in Peter’s recognition that Jesus is ‘the Christ, the Son of the living God’ (16:16). The second main section runs from 16:21 onwards and introduces the momentous theme that

Jesus will ‘go to Jerusalem, suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised’. Jesus’ suffering, death and resurrection will take us to the end of the Gospel.

A very similar division is also apparent within Mark’s Gospel. It starts with the headline at Mark 1:1 ‘The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God’. Part one of Mark comes to a climax with Peter’s recognition that Jesus is the Christ (Mark 8:29). Part two comes to a climax with Jesus on the cross and the centurion’s recognition ‘Truly this man was the Son of God’ (Mark 15:39). So, Matthew and Mark follow the same broad approach of revealing the identity of Christ before moving on to consider His suffering, death and resurrection.

Indeed each of the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, include the Transfiguration at exactly the same point in their narratives.

	Matthew	Mark	Luke
Peter’s confession of Christ	16:13-20	8:27-30	9:18-20
Jesus’ prediction of the cross	16:21-23	8:31-33	9:21-22
The call to the disciples	16:24-26	8:34-37	9:23-25
Jesus’ prediction of return	16:27	8:38	9:26
Introducing the Transfiguration	16:28	9:1	9:27
The Transfiguration	17:1-8	9:2-8	9:28-36

So, what is happening in this new section of the Gospel?

First, we hear the paradoxical truth that Jesus, who has just been acknowledged as God's anointed ruler (the Christ), is going to suffer and die in Jerusalem. It's paradoxical because it simply doesn't appear to make sense for the long hoped-for leader to die. That's certainly how Peter assessed the situation (16:22). Yet Jesus' robust reply (16:23) makes it crystal clear that Peter's human perspective was completely wrong - he needed to see things from God's perspective. In the coming days Jesus would reveal how His death would be a necessity (he *must* go - 16:21) so that the forgiveness of our sins would be made possible (26:28).

Second, Jesus speaks not just of His suffering and death but also of His resurrection (16:21) and future return in glory (16:27). Death would not be the end. Instead Jesus opens their eyes to the future and tells them of His glorious return as Judge. Not only is He revealing Himself as Saviour through His sacrificial death but He is also declaring Himself to be the Lord. The cross will be followed by the crown.

Third, within this section, Jesus instructs His disciples (16:24-26). Their pattern of life is to be shaped by the journey of Christ Himself. Just as Christ would take up His cross before entering glory, so that pattern must be embraced by His disciples. So, following Jesus will

involve taking up the cross (16:24). Although such self denial is costly and is described by Jesus as 'losing your life' (16:25) the rewards are glorious. Refusing to embrace the pattern of the cross now is a recipe for disaster (16:26). Holding on to the crown now will only lead to suffering later. The cross followed by the crown is the journey which Jesus marks out both for Himself and His followers.

But, if we were to put ourselves into the sandals of Peter and the other disciples, how do we know for sure that suffering will be followed by glory? If they are being encouraged to follow the pattern of what will happen to the Lord Jesus, how do they know that this Jesus whom they have been following will end up in glory? And if they are unsure about what will happen to Jesus, how can they have confidence that their journey following Jesus will also end up in glory? These are the questions which will introduce our next study and prepare the way for the significance of the Transfiguration.

Reflection and prayer on Matthew 16:21-28

- What are the most striking things we learn about Jesus' purpose and identity in this passage?
- What is the normal Christian life supposed to look like according to 16:24-26?
- In what ways have you found the pattern of Christian discipleship to be profoundly counter-cultural?

Almighty God,

whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified: mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

(Collect for The Third Sunday of Lent)

Day 2 : Matthew 16:28-17:1

Starting on the journey

Introduction

For as long as I can remember, holidays have always been about mountains. Annual trips up to my father's family took us through Glencoe and under the shadow of Ben Nevis. Soon the summits of these impressive mountains became an almost magnetic attraction, first on my own, then with Sue my wife and then with our children. Alongside the amazing vistas which opened up as we ascended, we battled with midges, rain and the occasional complaint. But when we arrived at the summit it always seemed worth it. Sometimes the view from the top was minimal with the whole mountain shrouded in mist but occasionally it would be stunning as we looked out across the Highlands and Islands to distant shores. Whatever the weather, it was always memorable.

As we explore our next section we see Jesus leading three of His disciples on their own mountain climbing expedition. We're not told the details about the weather conditions or whether any of them complained about the pace on the ascent. But it was certainly one of the most memorable experiences these disciples ever had.

Read Matthew 16:28-17:1

²⁸Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will

not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”¹ And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves.

Yesterday we finished our study by reminding ourselves that the pattern of discipleship for believers is to follow the journey of the Lord Jesus. Just as He will take up His cross before entering glory so we are to embrace that same pattern in our own lives. The cross comes before the crown (16:21-27).

But, how could the first disciples know that glory would arrive in the future, either for Jesus or for themselves? They may well have known that when Jesus referred to Himself as ‘the Son of Man’ at 16:27 He was highlighting the way in which He would fulfil Daniel 7:13,14. “I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.” But though it’s great to hear Jesus’ assertion that all this would certainly happen, the disciples were clearly lacking in confidence. They needed reassurance.

So, at this point in His teaching Jesus solemnly declares

to the disciples ('Truly, I say to you') that some of them will get an insight into Jesus' coming in glory before they 'taste death.' Perhaps Jesus uses this slightly strange phrase because the normal pattern is that in taking up our cross (16:24) we will indeed taste the sadness and pain of physical death before we experience resurrection and the glory of eternal life with Christ.

What is it that they will experience? Luke records that they will see the kingdom of God (Luke 9:27). Mark develops this further by referring to the fact that they will see the kingdom of God *come with power* (Mark 9:1). Matthew however keeps the focus on the person of the Lord Jesus. The power of the kingdom of God will be experienced only when they *see the Son of Man coming*. The future glory to which Matthew is referring is therefore not a place but a person! His focus is not so much on 'heaven' but on Jesus Himself, whose powerful presence is heaven.

But when will this experience for some of the disciples occur? All sorts of answers have been suggested by faithful Bible teachers. The possibilities include the resurrection of Jesus, the day of Pentecost or somehow Jesus' ongoing ministry after the ascension as the church multiplied across the Mediterranean lands. All these examples seek to give substance to the idea of the power of the kingdom of God being experienced. However, the most natural interpretation recognises

that immediately after this prediction each of the synoptic gospels introduces an indicator of time. So Matthew and Mark state 'and after six days' Jesus took three of the disciples up a high mountain. Given the fact that it is relatively rare in the synoptic gospels to have such a time reference, it seems to indicate that the events on the mountain will explain what it means for Jesus as the Son of Man to come in His kingdom.

In other words, what Jesus is doing in this incident as He leads the three disciples up the mountain is to provide reassurance that what He has already promised at 16:27, based on Daniel 7:13,14, will indeed happen. He wants them to have no doubt at all that He will enter His glory. That means they in turn can have complete confidence that, as they follow the pattern of Jesus in their own lives, they also will experience the glory of Christ.

What do we make of the differences between Luke and the others about the length of time between the conversation and the trip up the mountain? Whereas Matthew and Mark inform us that it was a period six days later, Luke refers to eight days. In actual fact Luke's statement is much more of an approximation - 'about eight days after Jesus said this' (Luke 9:28) - so there may be no substantive discrepancy. However, it may be that Luke has a particular theological reason for the eight day comment. Since Genesis speaks of creation in seven days, it means that the 'eighth day' is the first day of the

new week. It may well be that Luke wants his readers to see the glorified Jesus surrounded by believers from both the Old Testament (Moses and Elijah) and the New Testament (Peter, James and John) as the start of God's new creation. This is the new day which we long for that will be fully inaugurated when Jesus comes in power.

So, as we leave Jesus and the three disciples ascending the high mountain we notice that they were 'by themselves' (Matthew, Mark). There were no crowds, just three believers with Jesus. As they climbed higher I wonder if they were thinking about the view. What they needed to know and what they were soon to learn is that *Jesus is the view*. As they kept their focus on Jesus they would discover far more about His true identity. Not only would this strengthen their faith in Christ but it was designed to give them greater confidence that, as they embraced the cross, one day they would also share Christ's glory.

Reflection and prayer on Matthew 16:28-17:1

- How does the background in Daniel 7:13,14 help us to gain an even greater view of the Lord Jesus?
- What have you learnt about the purpose of the Transfiguration? In what ways should it provide encouragement to us in our own following of Christ?
- How should the Transfiguration episode shape our view of heaven?

*O God, the protector of all who trust in you,
without whom nothing is strong, nothing is holy:
increase and multiply upon us your mercy;
that with you as our ruler and guide
we may so pass through things temporal
that we lose not our hold on things eternal;
grant this, heavenly Father,
for our Lord Jesus Christ's sake,
who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy
Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen*

(Collect for The Fourth Sunday after Trinity)

Day 3 : Matthew 17:2

Seeing Jesus' glory

Introduction

Holidays are all about sightseeing. Having negotiated all the discomforts of travel you've now arrived in Mauritius/Madrid/Margate (delete as required). You're armed with your trusty travel guide and now it's decision time as you make your plans about what to see. Admittedly Madrid might not have the cultural pull of Margate but I'm sure that you'll find something to see. And so you wander around art galleries, old churches, historic monuments or take in a beautiful coastal panorama or sunset. You try to catch a few moments with your camera so that when it's all over you have the opportunity to bore your friends or family with a myriad ill-composed, out-of-focus shots. Some of the photos are stunning and find their way onto Facebook - 'look what I've seen!'

Yet however many sights you've seen and however many likes you've had on your Instagram account, there is quite literally nothing that can compare with what Peter, James and John see on their trip up the mountain.

Read Matthew 17:2

And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light.

Luke tells us that Jesus' appearance changed whilst Matthew and Mark specifically use the word 'transfigured'. Rather than dwell too much on the exact meaning of the word it's probably simplest to see how the gospel authors describe this event.

We start with Jesus' clothing. Luke describes how it became as bright as a flash of lightning, a gleaming, blinding bolt from heaven (Luke 9:29). Matthew says something similar by speaking of Jesus' clothes as white as light. Mark corroborates all this but tries to paint the picture by reference to someone making or washing clothing. 'His clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them' (Mark 9:3). So, to whichever writer we turn, we are being told that the brightness and whiteness of the clothing was distinctly unearthly - it seemed to have a heavenly origin because of its radiance and brilliance.

At this point Matthew brings his distinctive perspective into play once again. Mark passes over any description of Jesus' face whilst Luke simply states that His appearance changed. Matthew however says that 'His face shone like the sun'. Yes, the clothes were dazzling, but Matthew is captivated by the witness that Jesus' face embodied an even greater brilliance. This is the feature that holds our gaze.

Later the apostle John, who was present at the

Transfiguration, will record his own vision of Christ when he was in exile on Patmos. He describes his experience in this manner at Revelation 1:12-16: *“¹² Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³ and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. ¹⁴ The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, ¹⁵ his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. ¹⁶ In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.”* As with Matthew, the brilliant clothing is mentioned but the stress is also on the face of Christ shining like the sun at full strength.

Here we have a glorious vision of the Lord Jesus in all His glory. Soon in our passage we will come across Moses whose face also shone brightly after every encounter with the LORD (see Exodus 34:29-35). But the difference between Moses and Jesus is the difference between the moon and the sun. The moon reflects the light of the sun but does not produce any light itself. In contrast, light continually emanates from the sun wherever we are, whatever the time or season. So it is with the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In ascending the mountain it was as if the disciples had broken through into heaven itself. In this rarefied atmosphere they were now encountering Jesus as the

second person of the Trinity in all His glory. Just as the seraphim in Isaiah 6 covered their faces because of the brilliance of God's holiness so John informs us that they, like Isaiah, were in the presence of the King, the Lord Jesus (see John 12:40,41 NIV). Now these three disciples are also gazing at Jesus with His divinity shining through. They are standing in the very presence of God Himself. It was as if they were in the Holy of Holies at the very centre of the tabernacle. Yet that is the very place to which all believers are destined to proceed. No wonder the vision at the end of Revelation states that there would no longer be the need for the light of the sun because of the glory streaming from Christ: "*They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign for ever and ever.*" (Rev 22:4,5).

Our views of the Lord Jesus are often so diminished. Despite what we read in the Scriptures our minds are so distracted, weak and feeble that we soon reduce Jesus to someone refashioned in our own image. No wonder our faith is small and weak as we put reducing amounts of confidence in this diminished Christ. But here in Matthew 17:2 the disciples are given the antidote to such small views. Here they have been given a preview of the ascended Lord Jesus on His glorious throne.

Reflection and prayer on Matthew 17:2

- How can we encourage each other to hold on to this view of Jesus which we see in this verse and in Revelation 1:12-16?
- How should this vision of the reality of Christ in glory shape and encourage us in our lives as believers today?
- How does this incident help us to consider heaven?

*God our creator,
who in the beginning
commanded the light to shine out of darkness:
we pray that the light of the glorious gospel of Christ
may dispel the darkness of ignorance and unbelief,
shine into the hearts of all your people,
and reveal the knowledge of your glory in the face of Jesus
Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.*

(Collect for The Fourth Sunday of Epiphany)

Day 4 : Matthew 17:3

Making new connections

Introduction

Holidays involve meeting new people. Out of the normal routines of home, neighbourhood and work we bump into all sorts of individuals whom we wouldn't normally encounter. Perhaps we see them at the airport or at the next table at the taverna. Some we may struggle to communicate with in a coherent way. Others are wearing exotic clothing which is not available in the shops back home. It can be a wonderful though sometimes daunting experience as we rub shoulders with complete strangers.

As we rejoin Peter, James and John on their mountain trip they have already had the disturbing experience of seeing Jesus' appearance change. But now they are joined by two people they had heard about but whom they had never met before. I wonder if they needed to be formally introduced by Jesus or whether they picked up on their names as the conversation proceeded. Either way, they had now been joined by Moses and Elijah!

Read Matthew 17:3

And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.

Luke helpfully informs us that both Moses and Elijah

appeared in 'glorious splendour' (Luke 9:30 NIV). Now living in heaven their appearance reflected that reality. Just as Moses' face reflected the glory of encountering God in Exodus 34 so their continuous life in God's presence had an effect on them as surely as constant exposure to the sun has an effect in tanning our skin. But there is no hint that God's glory shone from within as is described to be the case with Jesus by Matthew.

Mark and Matthew pass over this observation. For some reason Mark refers to Elijah first, perhaps because he started his Gospel with a reference to Jesus' forerunner, John the Baptist, who fulfilled the Elijah role of getting people ready to meet Christ. Either way Moses and Elijah together represent the Law and the Prophets and therefore in a sense encapsulate the combined witness of the Old Testament in pointing forward to the work of Jesus as Messiah.

There is one passage in particular which links the ministries of Moses, Elijah and the Lord Jesus in a fascinating way - Malachi 4. *"For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. ² But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. ³ And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles*

of your feet, on the day when I act, says the Lord of hosts. ⁴ “Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel. ⁵ “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. ⁶ And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.”

As the prophet Malachi brings to a close our English versions of the Old Testament, believers are left with the Law of the Lord delivered by Moses (Mal 4:4) and the promise of a new Elijah figure who would prepare the way for the coming of the Lord (Mal 4:5,6). All through the centuries after Malachi God’s people would have access to the word of God outlining God’s ways but also highlighting their sin. All through those days they would be longing for another prophet to point the way towards the coming Lord so that they could be ready to meet Him.

But the climax of the Malachi passage is the focus on the coming of the Lord Himself. Fascinatingly He is described in this way: ‘the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings’. How appropriate that Matthew has thought to inform us that the Lord Jesus presides over this scene on the mountain with His face shining like the sun. Given this description from Malachi it is surely no coincidence that Jesus’ next step as ‘the

sun of righteousness' is to head down the mountain and to shed the light of the gospel in the darkest of valleys and to bring 'healing in His wings' as He lovingly cares for a demon-possessed boy (Matt 17:18).

Once again therefore these links with Malachi 4 help us not to be distracted. It's wonderful to meet Moses and Elijah but they are only servants preparing the way for God's people to encounter the glory of the Lord Jesus whose mission is to bring light and healing, life and joy. Just as the hotel staff are all there to serve you and welcome you to your room or table, so Moses and Elijah have exercised their ministries in order to pave the way for the coming of Jesus.

We'll explore the conversation that Jesus had with Moses and Elijah in our next study but it would certainly have been appropriate for the disciples to have used the words, penned centuries later, of Charles Wesley's great Christmas hymn:

Hail the heav'n-born Prince of Peace!

Hail the Son of Righteousness!

Light and life to all He brings,

Ris'n with healing in His wings.

Mild He lays His glory by,

Born that man no more may die,

Born to raise the sons of earth,

Born to give them second birth.

Hark! The herald angels sing,

"Glory to the newborn King!"

Reflection and prayer on Matthew 17:3

- What are the key things we learn about the Lord Jesus in this verse especially in view of the links with Malachi 4?
- How do this verse and Malachi 4 help us to understand the role of the Old Testament for believers?
- What part does the Old Testament play in helping me grow in my knowledge of Christ?

*O Lord Jesus Christ,
who at your first coming sent your messenger
to prepare your way before you:
grant that the ministers and stewards of your mysteries
may likewise so prepare and make ready your way
by turning the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the
just,
that at your second coming to judge the world
we may be found an acceptable people in your sight;
for you are alive and reign with the Father
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen*

(Collect for The Third Sunday of Advent)

Day 5 : Luke 9:30-31

Departure planning

Introduction

Travelling over the holiday season can be fraught with difficulty. Strikes by baggage handlers at Heathrow or traffic jams on the M6 can play havoc with all our meticulous plans. By temperament some of us are more cautious and like to leave plenty of time to ensure that our departure goes smoothly but, even so, sometimes we are left biting our nails as we see the window for our next travel connection slowly erode. Or perhaps you have memories of needing to get back to the house in order to check whether the iron was switched off or to pick up the passports. Whatever the scenario, departures need careful planning and are often the topic of animated conversation.

It was the same on the mountain as the disciples listened in on the extraordinary scene as Jesus engaged in conversation with Moses and Elijah. They were talking about Jesus' plans for a departure. This time we move to Luke's Gospel to find out the details.

Read Luke 9:30-31

And behold, two men were talking with him, Moses and Elijah,³¹ who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.

Whilst Matthew and Mark both refer to the fact that there was indeed a conversation between Jesus and the two characters from the Old Testament, only Luke informs us about the content of their discussion. They were speaking about Jesus' impending departure. However the actual word that Luke uses is pregnant with meaning. Literally, they spoke about Jesus' exodus.

Exodus refers simply to 'the way out' and so 'departure' is a fair enough translation, adopted by many translators. Yet the fact that Luke uses this specific word is very significant. He wants his readers to realise that Jesus' departure cannot fully be understood without an understanding of the Biblical background recorded in the Book of Exodus. As we return to that historical episode we see God's people described as 'God's firstborn son' (Ex 4:22). Though suffering in slavery under Pharaoh they are to find a way out, an exodus, through the death of the Passover Lamb and via the Red Sea. The whole purpose of this exodus was not simply to escape from Egypt. It was so that God's people (His son!) could enter into His glorious presence within the tabernacle. That is where the Book of Exodus ends, with God dwelling in the tabernacle in the midst of His gathered people (though it takes the Book of Leviticus to describe how God's people would be able to enter His presence). So the theme of the exodus is the purchase of God's people so that they can enter God's presence.

Given that background, we can start to see how significant the content of Jesus' conversation with Moses and Elijah was on the mountain. Jesus is preparing Himself not just for a departure in terms of His forthcoming death that He had just predicted (Luke 9:22). He is preparing for a very specific sort of death as the Passover Lamb that would enable God's people to enter God's presence. No wonder Luke's Gospel ends with Jesus lifting up His hands and blessing His people just like the High Priest, signalling that sins have been forgiven and that access into God's presence has been granted (Luke 24:50-52). He Himself will go through death to resurrection life at the right hand of the Father just as God's people (God's son! - Ex 4:22) would go through the Red Sea to emerge in God's presence on Mount Sinai. In all of these links Luke is reminding his readers how Jesus saw these things to be fulfilled in Himself. Indeed on the Emmaus Road he patiently explained these things to two discouraged followers. 'And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself' (Luke 24:27).

Indeed the theme of 'fulfilment' or what has been 'accomplished' (same word) is one of Luke's key themes. He starts his Gospel by referring to it as 'a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us' (Luke 1:1). He ends his Gospel by recording Jesus' words to his disciples that 'everything written about me in

the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled' (Luke 24:44). And right at the turning point of his narrative he records Jesus speaking at the Transfiguration about 'his exodus which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem' (Luke 9:31).

How grateful we should be to Luke for recording the subject of this precious conversation. We are not left simply to gaze in wonder at the glorious identity of the Lord Jesus but we are to be thrilled by the reminder that He had determined to fulfil a particular departure at Jerusalem, on a cross, in order that the true purpose of the exodus might be accomplished so that all of God's people might be gathered around God's glorious presence. For that to happen, Jesus would have to descend from the mountain top into the deepest and darkest valley ... a journey that He shortly planned to embark on. 'When the days drew near for Jesus to be taken up, He set His face to go to Jerusalem' (Luke 9:51). Amazingly, in this departure He had us in mind.

Reflection and prayer on Luke 9:30-31

- How does the 'exodus' terminology enrich our understanding of Jesus' mission?
- How does this verse fit in with the whole sweep of the Bible?
- In what ways can we see the costliness of our salvation in these verses?

*Father in heaven,
whose Son Jesus Christ was wonderfully transfigured
before chosen witnesses upon the holy mountain,
and spoke of the exodus he would accomplish at Jerusalem:
give us strength so to hear his voice and bear our cross
that in the world to come we may see him as he is;
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.*

(Collect for The Transfiguration of our Lord)

Day 6 : Matthew 17:4

Missing the point

Introduction

When you're on holiday you can end up doing some stupid things simply because you don't really understand the language, the culture or the identities of the people around you. At the hotel you lean back in your chair and ask a smartly dressed man wearing an immaculately ironed white shirt for a coffee, only to realise later in embarrassment that he is actually a fellow guest. Or perhaps on the basis of the information you have gleaned from your out of date travel guide you start informing your family and others about the history behind a particular landmark, correcting the helpful input from a bystander ... whom you later discover is the guest lecturer on the cruise and happens to be a recently retired Professor of History. We can all get things wrong, especially when we are out of context, surrounded by strangers; it's not that difficult to make mistakes.

It is at this point in the narrative of the Transfiguration that Peter opens his mouth. There is a limited amount of logic to what he says, but ultimately he shows that he has completely missed the point. In doing so he helps us to learn from his mistakes!

Read Matthew 17:4

And Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good that we are here. If

you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.”

In reconstructing what happened we'll need first to turn back to Luke's account. Alone amongst the Gospels Luke records that Jesus had ascended the mountain to pray. That fact is mentioned twice (Luke 9:28,29). Indeed it was as Jesus was praying to His Father that He was transfigured. But when Jesus starts to pray the disciples do not have a particularly good track record of staying awake. Certainly later on in the Garden of Gethsemane the disciples sleep as Jesus prays (Luke 22:45,46) and that appears to be the case here. Whilst Jesus is transfigured and Moses and Elijah appear on the mountain, Peter, James and John are described as being 'heavy with sleep' (Luke 9:32). As they take in the scene around them they quickly become fully awake - one can easily imagine the increasing shock as they point in stunned silence at what they are witnessing! At this point in the narrative Mark adds that they were all frightened (Mark 9:6). What on earth had happened as they dozed? Had they died and been transported to heaven? Or were they about to be judged as they looked into the blazing brightness of Jesus' face? They were totally dumbfounded by the scene that greeted them. Both Mark and Luke are in agreement that as Peter opened his mouth he had no idea what he was saying (Mark 9:6; Luke 9:33). No wonder, having just woken up, he got things so badly wrong!

Yet it wasn't all wrong. His short speech started well, 'Lord, it is good for us to be here ...' He then puts forward his great idea, 'I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah'. The word he uses can be translated as tent, shelter or booth. The idea of building such tents came from the wilderness wanderings of God's people following the exodus. The Feast of Booths occurred as a sort of harvest festival near the end of the year (see Lev 23:33-43). It was to be a regular reminder to God's people that they had been rescued from the land of Egypt and had to live in temporary shelters while they travelled to the Promised Land. Perhaps, given Peter's suggestion, it is even possible that the transfiguration happened at that very time of year. Indeed there are some intriguing links that are worth exploring.

Notice the details of what is said in Leviticus 23:26-34 (NIV): *The Lord said to Moses,*²⁷ *"The tenth day of this seventh month is the Day of Atonement. Hold a sacred assembly and deny yourselves, and present a food offering to the Lord.*²⁸ *Do not do any work on that day, because it is the Day of Atonement, when atonement is made for you before the Lord your God.*²⁹ *Those who do not deny themselves on that day must be cut off from their people.*³⁰ *I will destroy from among their people anyone who does any work on that day.*³¹ *You shall do no work at all. This is to be a lasting ordinance for the generations to come, wherever you live.*³² *It is a day of sabbath rest for you, and you must deny yourselves. From the evening of the ninth day of the month*

until the following evening you are to observe your sabbath.”

³³ The Lord said to Moses, ³⁴ “Say to the Israelites: ‘On the fifteenth day of the seventh month the Lord’s Festival of Tabernacles begins, and it lasts for seven days.

This passage starts with instructions about the Day of Atonement at which various sacrifices, including the scapegoat, enabled the tabernacle to be cleansed and the people forgiven. It is a period in which God’s people must deny themselves (see Lev 23:27,32). It is to be held on the tenth day of the seventh month. It is then followed six days later, counting inclusively as would be the normal practice, on the fifteenth day of the same month by the Feast of Tabernacles. Given this specific background, how striking it is that Jesus introduces the prediction of His atoning death (Matt 16:21), follows it up by a call for the disciples to deny themselves (Matt 16:24) and then six days later (Matt 17:1) Peter speaks about erecting booths on the mountain!

So, it may well be that at some level Peter is on the right track, though he barely knows what he is saying! Atonement is not an end in itself but is designed to lead to believers dwelling in God’s presence on God’s holy mountain.

And yet ... Peter had also got it so wrong! Three shelters with one each for Jesus, Moses and Elijah seems to be based on some sort of equivalence - that they’re all

special people within God's purposes, so 'let's treat them the same and give each of them a shelter' seems to be his underlying assumption. This is where Peter is so wrong. It will be John who will use the same word to speak of Jesus as the Word became flesh who dwelt, or tabernacled, amongst us (John 1:14). In other words Jesus Himself in His very person is the place of God's presence. He is the temple (John 2:18-21), the tabernacle, the place where we meet with God the Father (John 14:9,10). Though Peter had correctly identified Jesus as the Christ (Matt 16:16) he had failed to see Jesus as the very presence of God Himself. The correct response was worship and adoration, not clumsy attempts to do something that unwittingly diminished Jesus' status.

Reflection and prayer on Matthew 17:4

- To what extent can you identify with Peter in this passage?
- To what extent can you see a gap between your devotion to Christ and your understanding of Him? How can these sorts of gaps be closed?
- What should our response be to what is revealed about Jesus at the Transfiguration?

*O Lord, we beseech you mercifully to hear the prayers of your people who call upon you;
and grant that they may both perceive and know what things they ought to do,
and also may have grace and power faithfully to fulfil them;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen*

(Collect for The Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity)

Day 7 : Matthew 17:5

Urgent attention required

Introduction

‘Quick! Look over there!’ We were on holiday on a boat off the coast of Iceland along with a large party all hoping to see whales. We immediately turned as instructed and were rewarded with the sight of a large humpback whale surfacing effortlessly a short distance away. Though not completely unexpected, the view was exhilarating and took our breath away. Over the next thirty minutes there were regular sightings each time punctuated by calls to look in a particular direction. We were so grateful to those who had first directed our attention to something happening on the other side of the boat. It was a sight that we would not want to have missed. We watched in silent awe.

So it was that at this point in the narrative the three disciples also heard a voice directing their attention. As we shall see they were also filled with awe at the sight before them. But what held their attention was far more astounding than what we witnessed off the coast of Iceland.

Read Matthew 17:5

He (Peter) was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.”

Matthew does not want us to miss anything. One of his distinctive words is 'Behold!'. In the older translations it is often rendered as 'Lo!'. Many translators regard the word as redundant and leave no trace of the word in their translation but that would be a serious mistake. It has the idea of drawing something to our attention with a note of urgency. So Matthew starts his gospel by speaking of Joseph's puzzlement about Mary's pregnancy. Should he quietly divorce her? But as he considered these things, *behold*, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. (Matt 1:20). Similarly at the end of his gospel account the Risen Jesus addresses the disciples, "And *behold*, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matt 28:20). There are some things which simply must be pointed out so that you don't miss them!

In Matthew's account of the Transfiguration he uses 'Behold!' three times. This is often obscured in many of our modern translations. So, for example, the NIV fails to include the word at all. The ESV does better and uses it twice in 17:3 and 17:5 but actually it occurs twice even within verse 5. Literally it says that while Peter was still speaking, *behold* - a bright cloud overshadowed them and, *behold* - a voice from the cloud spoke. One can see why the translators may have felt that the word was redundant but from Matthew's point of view he

doesn't want anyone to miss out on the view. He wants everyone to see the extraordinary event that is now unfolding!

So what's happening now that is to hold our attention? The first thing to notice is that a cloud has overshadowed them. When climbing mountains in Scotland, being covered by a cloud is usually the sign of rain and the need to put on wet weather clothing. But within the Old Testament the appearance of a cloud denoted the very presence of God. At the end of the Book of Exodus we see this link being made. *“Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.”*³⁵ *And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.*³⁶ *Throughout all their journeys, whenever the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle, the people of Israel would set out.*³⁷ *But if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not set out till the day that it was taken up.*³⁸ *For the cloud of the Lord was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel throughout all their journeys.”* (Exodus 40:34-38)

The cloud descending on the Mount of Transfiguration proclaimed the very presence of God the Father. Matthew helpfully adds that it was a 'bright' cloud, highlighting that the glory of God shone out from it. Putting together the brightness of the cloud and the brilliance of the face of Jesus we can easily understand the fear attributed to the disciples which Luke reports

(Luke 9:34).

Further, Luke has already used the word for ‘cover’ or ‘overshadow’ before in his narrative. It occurs as Mary is addressed by the angel Gabriel. “And the angel answered her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will *overshadow* you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God.” (Luke 1:35). So this is a vision which combines the glory of the Father, the Son and the Spirit. No wonder Matthew does not want to miss out on this view!

But it’s more than a view. It’s also a voice speaking out from the cloud. In our next study we will look at the content of what is said but in the meantime we focus on who is addressed. The words that are spoken from the cloud have largely been spoken before at Jesus’ baptism (see Matthew 3:16,17; Mark 1:10,11; Luke 3:22). The words were addressed directly to Him granting assurance of His identity. But here the words from the cloud are directed not just to Jesus but also, particularly, to the three disciples. Here we have the voice of God giving a personal authentication and verification of the identity of the Lord Jesus for the benefit of the three disciples to which Matthew insists that we pay attention.

So in using ‘behold’ twice within this one verse Matthew is in effect summarising the call of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Behold ... the cloud! Behold ... the voice!

Look at the glory of God and listen to His voice! Look and listen!

Reflection and prayer on Matthew 17:5

- What is it that Matthew wants to ensure that we don't miss in this verse?
- Why do you think Luke highlights the fear of the disciples as they entered the cloud?
- How can we get better at keeping our attention on Christ?

*Almighty and everlasting God,
you have given us your servants grace,
by the confession of a true faith,
to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity
and in the power of the divine majesty to worship the Unity:
keep us steadfast in this faith,
that we may evermore be defended from all adversities;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.*

(Collect for Trinity Sunday)

Day 8 : Matthew 17:5

Look and listen!

Introduction

As we came down the mountain track towards the end of our holiday we stumbled across a group comprising eight men and women of assorted ages. They wore wetsuits, harnesses and protective helmets. It was the first time we had witnessed canyoning. We saw the last man in the party splash his way through a pool of freezing water to join up with the others. Their next move was to descend a long, steep, waterfall section. Having only just arrived at the scene we had no idea who was who. Yet as we looked, it became very obvious which person was the instructor. As some of the group looked nervously with one eye at the volume of water cascading over the sheer edge they were all intently listening for their next instructions. Those a bit further away strained their necks forward in order to catch every word against the backcloth of the sound of the water crashing on the rocks beneath them. Each person in the group clearly recognised the need to listen attentively.

As we rejoin the disciples on the mountain, covered now in the bright cloud of God's presence, they have now been left with one simple job - listen!

Read Matthew 17:5

He (Peter) was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him."

In our last study we focused on the significance of the cloud and Matthew's encouragement for us to look at the scene. Now we focus on what was actually said. In essence the words repeat what was said to Jesus at His baptism but there are some different emphases highlighted in the Gospel accounts together with one very significant addition.

However, in one sense the voice from the cloud says nothing new. It simply underlines what has already been revealed about Jesus from the Old Testament. No new information is being conveyed, but the words from the cloud gather together three strands to enable the disciples and ourselves to view the ministry of the Lord Jesus with even greater clarity. He is prophet, priest and king.

He is the King. The words 'This is my Son' are derived from Psalm 2. *"As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill." I will tell of the decree: The Lord said to me, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel."* (Psalm 2:6-

9) God the Father is identifying Jesus with the King described in Psalm 2 who will rule the nations. Matthew has already told us that He is the true David, from whom He is descended (Matt 1:1,6,17). Therefore the One whom they had climbed the mountain alongside and whom they had followed for several years, observing His full humanity, is the One before whom all nations would bow down. All power to subdue every opposition is in His hands. He is the King we need.

He is the Priest. The next words describe Jesus as loved, chosen (Luke 9:35) and as pleasing to God (Matthew 17:5). These various descriptions all appear to come together in Isaiah 42.

Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his law. (Isaiah 42:1-4) Upheld by God's love, this servant is chosen and is precious in His sight. Within the context of Isaiah's teaching, this is known as the first of the Servant Songs which describes an individual who will suffer and offer his life in order to procure forgiveness and new life for his people (see especially Isaiah 53:4-6). The servant's ministry is the priestly role of presenting an acceptable offering to

the Lord. The message of Isaiah is that this acceptable offering is none other than the servant dying in the place of sinners. Such commitment and sacrifice elicits the love and pleasure of the Father. Though Peter has failed to understand why Jesus must suffer (see Matt 16:22) the voice from the cloud reaffirms that this pathway is the only way forwards to bring forgiveness of sins. He is the Priest we need.

He is the Prophet. The final words ‘Listen to Him!’ had not featured at Jesus’ baptism (see Matt 3:17) but now that the disciples were gathered around Him they needed to hear this final word. Again, originally they had come from the Old Testament, this time from the lips of Moses. *“The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen—¹⁶ just as you desired of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, ‘Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God or see this great fire any more, lest I die.’¹⁷ And the Lord said to me, ‘They are right in what they have spoken.¹⁸ I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him.”* (Deut 18:15-18) Moses had promised that someone from God’s people would come who would be a greater prophet. They must listen to him. The voice from the cloud is affirming that this has now happened. Jesus’ teaching may have seemed puzzling to the disciples both then (Matt 16:24-27) and now. Why should I have

to deny myself? Do I have to take up my cross? What's wrong with investing in this life? And the answer from heaven is 'Listen to Him! ... He knows what He's talking about.' He is the Prophet we need.

Right at the centre of Matthew's gospel the fullness of Jesus' identity and mission is unveiled. No wonder we're supposed to look ... and listen. Is there anything more crucial for us to do?

Reflection and prayer on Matthew 17:5

- How should I relate to Jesus as my King?
- How should I relate to Jesus as my priest?
- How should I relate to Jesus as my prophet?

*Blessed Lord,
who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning:
help us so to hear them,
to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them
that, through patience, and the comfort of your holy word,
we may embrace and forever hold fast the hope of everlasting
life,
which you have given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.*

(Collect for The Last Sunday after Trinity)

Day 9 : Matthew 17:6-7

True worship

Introduction

Apparently anything worth seeing on holiday these days needs to be seen from behind the camera on your phone. A family member diving into the pool gets carefully recorded. The beautifully presented main course at the restaurant must be snapped. The amazing view from the campsite is definitely worth a few images. But the current fascination is that ideally all these different scenes need to include ourselves. Everyone is taking a selfie - this is me in Pisa ... this is me at the fish market ... this is me and an enormous ice-cream ... and so it goes on. We've simply got to be at the centre of our holiday pictures. After all, it's my holiday and I want to record where I've been and what I've done.

Me at the centre is both totally understandable and also the complete opposite of the Biblical pattern of worship. Me at the centre is the very definition of sin. Christ at the centre is the focus of true worship.

Read Matthew 17:6-7

When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Rise, and have no fear."

Only Matthew provides us with the response of the

three disciples to what they had seen and heard from the voice from the cloud. Once again it links into one of Matthew's key themes which he explores throughout his Gospel. At the start of his Gospel we are introduced to the first worshippers of Jesus, the Magi. When they reach Bethlehem and find Him we read that 'they fell down and worshipped Him' (Matthew 2:11). At the other end of the Gospel we see the eleven disciples going up a mountain in Galilee to encounter the Risen Lord Jesus. On seeing Him, 'they worshipped Him' (Matthew 28:17) where the word includes the idea of falling to one's knees in homage. Matthew seems to be saying, that's what you do when you recognise Jesus for who He is.

More than that, another key idea within Matthew is that when you see Jesus for who He really is you are full of awe, so much so that he uses the word 'terrified'. The people who witness the paralysed man being completely healed are 'afraid' (Matt 9:8). When Jesus dies and an earthquake occurs those standing by 'were filled with awe' (Matt 27:54).

So here on the Mount of Transfiguration Matthew shows us that this is an authentic experience of encountering the Lord Jesus Christ by revealing to us that the disciples fell facedown on the ground, filled with great terror. Christ in all His glory as Prophet, Priest and King stood before them. Given those circumstances their response was the only sane thing to do. This wasn't a time to take

a selfie to put on Facebook or Instagram. This was a time to recognise the awesome fact that they were in the presence of God Himself.

This authentic response is corroborated by the apostle John years later. His response is remarkably similar. *“In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, ‘Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.’”* (Rev 1:16-18) He encounters Christ in all His glory and his first reaction is not to sing or dance but to fall down in awe and wonder.

Yet if this vision imprints a mark of Jesus’ awesome power and glory, we should also note His response in verse 7. Seeing His disciples facedown He comes over to them and gently touches them and speaks to them with compassion and love. Just as He gently touches in order to bring healing or even life (Matt 8:3; 9:25) so he touches the disciples to restore and strengthen them. Having already been revealed as the suffering servant of Isaiah 42:1ff Jesus deals with them as indicated in Isaiah 43:3 - the bruised reed He does not break, the smouldering wick He does not snuff out. Instead He gently and carefully touches and restores. Just as He reassured those who fell before Him after

the resurrection (Matt 28:9,10) so He breathes words of comfort to the three. His glorious greatness goes hand in glove with His tenderness, love and compassion.

Sometimes as believers we are puzzled about the fear of the Lord. Surely fear is a bad thing which should be banished? But think for a moment about a child on holiday at the seaside. The waves are crashing onto the beach and ripping back down the sand with considerable force. The sea is beautiful but it's right for it to be considered with great caution because of its overwhelming power. There needs to be an appropriate fear or respect. Yet with an adult holding the infant's hand the sea can be enjoyed and becomes a source of joy. So it is with Christ. He is to be feared but in His hands we are safe to explore and enjoy all His gracious and sovereign purposes.

So, in these verses Matthew with his distinctive voice has narrated the events in such a way as to reaffirm Christ's glory whilst introducing His wonderful compassion and tenderness. How we need such an encounter today.

Reflection and prayer on Matthew 17:6-7

- What has struck you most about the portrayal of the Lord Jesus in these verses?
- Why do we struggle to understand what it means to ‘fear the Lord’?
- How should these verses help us to reshape our views about worship?

*Almighty Father,
who in your great mercy gladdened the disciples with the
sight of the risen Lord:
give us such knowledge of his presence with us,
that we may be strengthened and sustained by his risen life
and serve you continually in righteousness and truth;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.*

(Collect for The Third Sunday of Easter)

Day 10 : Matthew 17:8

Keeping your focus

Introduction

You're at a busy airport terminal at the start of your holiday. Once again there are cancellations and so the hall is packed with travellers keeping an anxious eye on the proceedings. A murmur floats across the vast space and suddenly people are on the move heading in different directions. Instinctively you grab the handles of your carry-on luggage and start moving, trying to catch sight of the nearest departure board. But though a vast percentage of the occupants have drifted off in varying degrees of urgency your flight has not been called. Your focus must remain on the board alone, not on the others around. Your ultimate destination has nothing to do with what may be happening in your peripheral vision and everything to do with the information which needs to be the focus of your attention.

So it is with the three disciples. There has been so much to take in, so many questions to ask of Moses and Elijah. But their focus at the end must remain on Jesus.

Read Matthew 17:8

And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.

The three disciples have been through an extraordinary

experience. One moment drifting off to sleep after the exhaustion of climbing to the summit. The next not knowing exactly where to look as they try to comprehend the unfolding scene. They try to take in the brilliance of Jesus' clothing as they also shield themselves from looking too directly at the brightness of His face. They then catch sight of two of the greatest figures from the Old Testament who hadn't been seen for hundreds and hundreds of years and they listen in to the conversation as it develops between Moses, Elijah and Jesus. Then to cap it all they are enfolded in a bright cloud and they hear words from God Almighty directed specifically to them concerning the Lord Jesus. And then ... as quickly as the whole scene came together everything seems to evaporate. Each of the gospel writers has the same testimony, using slightly different wording, to the effect that they were left looking at Jesus alone. By now this is Jesus looking as He had done as they had toiled up the mountain. No brilliant clothing or shining face - just Jesus. It was as if the stage had been filled, accompanied by spotlights and sounds, but now all that remained was one solitary character on whom everyone must now focus their attention

Everything that had happened had been pointing to this conclusion. The clothing and face of Jesus had been designed to point out His true divine identity. The conversation with Moses and Elijah had purposely focused on His true work and mission shortly to be

accomplished. The words from the cloud for their benefit had reinforced these things and specifically added the priority of ensuring that above all they must listen to Him. For these disciples, and indeed for all who hear their testimony, Jesus could never be the same. Though now looking as He had always looked they now knew far more. Their vision and understanding of Jesus had been expanded and exploded, never to remain the same. As we shall see in a later study, though Peter's eyes were often dimmed and somehow he even denied knowing Jesus, eventually the Transfiguration came to have an incredibly decisive hold in his understanding of the Lord Jesus that would be pivotal for the early church (see 2 Peter 1:16-18).

Meeting a loved one arriving for a holiday at a large international airport your eyes scan the vast throng. There are many things which could distract you. But you are focussed on one person. Though they may be unknown to almost everyone else there they hold a special place in your heart. This person loves you, though you often feel unworthy of that love. Then you see the individual and your focus is entirely on them. You embrace and look and listen, oblivious to the chaos around you.

So it is with this ending to the incident on the Mount of Transfiguration. We're not meant to be looking anywhere else. Our focus is to be on looking and

listening to Him. A little later on, Luke recalls the incident at the home of Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38-42). Martha finds herself distracted with many things but Jesus reminds the assembled company that Mary has found the *one* thing needed. She is sitting at the feet of this Jesus, looking and listening to Him.

Having filled our minds to the full with each aspect of the Transfiguration we also need to refocus on Christ alone.

Reflection and prayer on Matthew 17:8

- In what ways is verse 8 quite a surprising end to this incident?
- What are the reasons why we find it so difficult to keep our focus on Christ?
- What are the practical things which we could do in order to retain a focus on Jesus?

*Almighty Father,
whose Son was revealed in majesty
before he suffered death upon the cross:
give us grace to perceive his glory,
that we may be strengthened to suffer with him
and be changed into his likeness, from glory to glory;
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen*

(Collect for The next Sunday before Lent)

Day 11 : Matthew 17:9-13

What happened next? (Part One)

Introduction

What a contrast! The morning and early afternoon were spent at a remote, unspoilt beauty spot. The waves crashed onto the sand. A couple of windsurfers cheerfully battled against the elements out in the bay. The sun slanted across the landscape picking out some of our favourite haunts. But then all too soon after packing up and getting into the car, we'd hit traffic. We made slow progress down increasingly busy roads before we found ourselves in monotonous suburbia. The holiday was coming to an end and we were heading back to the world of work and routines. Holidays don't last for ever.

So it was for Jesus and the three disciples. Their mountain top experience had been utterly glorious in virtually every way, with the exception of Peter's foot-in-mouth episode. But now it was time to return to the darkness of the valley.

Read Matthew 17:9-13

⁹And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, "Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead."¹⁰ And the disciples asked him, "Then why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?"¹¹ He answered, "Elijah does come, and he will restore all things.

¹² But I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands.”¹³ Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist.

The three disciples have been present at one of the most genuinely awesome events ever recorded. It was an utterly overwhelming experience. As we have seen Matthew has particularly stressed the face of Christ as being like the sun as well as the brightness of the cloud. Adding to this the weightiness of the words of the voice from the cloud and we can imagine the disciples bursting with a desire to let everybody else know what they had seen and heard.

Yet that is not going to be the way forward. There will come a day, after the resurrection, when they can tell everyone what they have witnessed (Matt 17:9) as indeed Peter will do in his final letter (2 Peter 1:16-18). But for the time being they are to be silent. It seems so puzzling to us. Yet we need to understand that the vision was given specifically as a means of reassurance to the disciples to enable them to have complete confidence that the Lord Jesus will indeed return in all His glory. It must not sidetrack them from the fact that Jesus is heading to the cross (Matt 16:21; 17:12). The path to glory will be via the cross, both for the Lord Jesus and His disciples. And so Jesus leads them down the

mountain into the valley as He takes each deliberate step forward that will lead to His sacrificial death for us. The disciples must not preach about glory until they understand the cross.

As they proceed, Jesus also straightens out their thinking about Elijah. Having seen Elijah on the mountain the disciples must have been reflecting on the teaching in Malachi 4 which promised a future Elijah-type ministry. It was on this basis that the teachers of the law said that 'first Elijah must come' (Matt 17:10). Might that mean for example that the Elijah whom they had actually seen on the mountain was also going to follow them down and start preaching? All sorts of questions must have been in their mind.

At this point Jesus highlights the way in which the Scriptures are to be fulfilled. An 'Elijah' would come with a ministry to restore people back to a relationship with God before the appearance of the Lord. That fitted exactly with John the Baptist's ministry with his message of repentance and forgiveness. He has been presented as the forerunner, dressed like Elijah, who would prepare the way for the coming of the Lord Jesus (Matt 3:1-12). It is Matthew who makes this connection absolutely clear by inserting a summary at the end of our passage (Matt 17:13) to show that the promised 'Elijah' was none other than John the Baptist.

But Jesus does more than simply help the disciples to get the order of events and characters. He reminds them that John the Baptist had been rejected and suffered, his imprisonment being recorded at Matthew 4:12 and his death at Matthew 14:1-12. His enormously powerful ministry had led to suffering and death. So it would be with the Lord Jesus Himself, 'So also the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands' (Matthew 17:12). The pattern of suffering and death revealed in the forerunner will be seen in Christ.

All this brings us to the point of this passage. The disciples are itching to speak of glory whereas the Lord Jesus is preparing for His death on a cross. The disciples want to speak about what happened on the mountain top whereas the Lord Jesus knows that His true identity will only be fully revealed as He heads down into the valley. The disciples love the mountain top and enjoying great experiences, whereas the Lord Jesus loves sinners and is prepared to go down into the darkest valley for our salvation.

The Reformer Martin Luther spoke of the contrast between theologians of glory and theologians of the cross. One speaks of success and victory, the other speaks of suffering and death. Only one represents the correct route, both for Christ and the believer. Which route are you on?

Reflection and prayer on Matthew 17:9-13

- To what extent are we in danger of making the same mistakes as the disciples?
- How has this passage enabled you to see the wonder of Jesus' love in an even clearer way?
- What did 'success' look like for Jesus, and what do you think it should look like for disciples?

*Most merciful God,
who by the death and resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ
delivered and saved the world:
grant that by faith in him who suffered on the cross
we may triumph in the power of his victory;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.*

(Collect for The Fifth Sunday of Lent)

Day 12 : Luke 9:37-43

What happened next? (Part Two)

Introduction

‘I wonder who we’ll see first when we get back home?’ In practice it will usually depend on what time we are driving back. Sometimes it will be an acquaintance walking through the town from the shops. Or perhaps it will be a neighbour parking their car and giving us a welcoming wave of recognition. It might not be until the following morning as one of us heads out to replenish supplies for the fridge. And of course when there is an opportunity to snatch a conversation there is all the local news to catch up on. ‘Have you heard how ill so and so is?’ Unexpected people with unexpected news await you.

So it was as Jesus and the disciples headed down the mountain and into the valley. They encounter an unexpected family struggling with devastating news.

Read Luke 9:37-43

³⁷ On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. ³⁸ And behold, a man from the crowd cried out, “Teacher, I beg you to look at my son, for he is my only child. ³⁹ And behold, a spirit seizes him, and he suddenly cries out. It convulses him so that he foams at the mouth, and shatters him, and will hardly leave him. ⁴⁰ And I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not.” ⁴¹

Jesus answered, "O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here."⁴² While he was coming, the demon threw him to the ground and convulsed him. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit and healed the boy, and gave him back to his father.⁴³ And all were astonished at the majesty of God.

Having descended from the mountain, Matthew, Mark and Luke all include the incident where Jesus heals a boy with a demon (Matthew 17:14-21; Mark 9:14-29; Luke 9:37-43a). Mark's is the longest and most thorough account but we will stay with Luke, who introduces a number of features not included by the others which are of particular interest.

It is Luke who informs us that this boy is not just the father's son but his only child (Luke 9:38). It's the sort of detail that Luke points out on a number of different occasions. The widow of Nain's son who dies, but is then raised by Jesus, is also an only son (Luke 7:12). Similarly, it is only Luke who points out that Jairus' daughter, also to be raised from the dead, is an only daughter (Luke 8:42). This has the effect of raising the level of emotional engagement considerably. This father in this story only has one son and the boy is suffering intensely at the hands of an evil spirit. No wonder the man begs Jesus to do something.

And so Jesus calls for the man to bring the *boy* to Jesus,

except in Luke's version he says, 'bring your *son*' (Luke 9:41). This is the essence of his identity, a much loved son. On healing the boy it is also only Luke who tells us that Jesus 'gave him back to his *father*' (Luke 9:42). What we are to behold is the deep bond of love between the father and his only son.

Staying with Luke, he also rounds out his account with a fascinating detail. We read that all were astonished at the *majesty* of God (Luke 9:43). This word only occurs twice elsewhere in the New Testament but one of these occurrences comes from Peter's own account of the Transfiguration at 2 Peter 1:16 when he states that 'we were eyewitnesses of His *majesty*'. Amazingly the same majesty and glory of Christ that could be observed by Peter on the mountain summit, with Jesus' face and clothing shining brilliantly, would also be observed within the darkest valley, as the burning love of Christ for this young boy released him from Satan's grip. Luke doesn't want us to think of Jesus' majesty as solely to do with external appearances but he wants us to see that it also has everything to do with Jesus' loving heart.

And there's one more thing which we must also notice from Luke's wonderful account. The word for 'only child' (Luke 9:38) occurs outside Luke on four other occasions in the Gospels. On each occasion it refers to the Lord Jesus Himself (John 1:14,18; 3:16,18). Jesus is *the* 'only son'. Luke has already reminded us that Jesus was going

to accomplish His exodus (Luke 9:31) and of course that would be in fulfilment of the Passover Lamb dying in the place of the firstborn son in each house in Egypt (Exodus 12:12). The only 'only son' who is going to die in the Gospels, in fulfilment of the Exodus and the Passover, will be the Lord Jesus. Consider in our story the love of that human father for his only son. Consider the even greater love of the Heavenly Father for His only Son, the Lord Jesus, the one whom He has proclaimed on the mountain in the words, 'This is my Son!' (Luke 9:35). At such enormous cost, the Father and Son together, willingly and voluntarily, face the rending of their relationship in order to heal a family disrupted by evil and reunite father and son. Here is the majesty of God, that Father and Son enter into the darkest valley in order to enable other fathers, sons, mothers and daughters to experience life on the mountain top, released, healed and restored to live in the presence of God. Here is the pattern of the cross with the Lord of Glory giving up everything, descending into the darkness in order to raise us to glory.

Reflection and prayer on Luke 9:37-43

- What has struck you most about the way that Luke has told this story?
- What has 'astonished' you about 'the majesty of God' in both the narrative of the Transfiguration and also this incident with the boy and the evil spirit?
- In what way is it such an encouragement that this incident occurred in the valley, rather than on the mountain top?

*Heavenly Father,
whose blessed Son was revealed
to destroy the works of the devil
and to make us the children of God and heirs of eternal life:
grant that we, having this hope,
may purify ourselves even as he is pure;
that when he shall appear in power and great glory
we may be made like him in his eternal and glorious kingdom;
where he is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.*

(Collect for The Second Sunday before Advent)

Day 13 : 2 Peter 1:16-18

Eyewitness evidence

Introduction

We had never expected to be there. We bumped into some friends whilst on holiday in Switzerland. Due to an unexpected violent thunderstorm the open air event that they had been attending had to be postponed. Now they had spare tickets and we were invited to join them on the rearranged evening. So it was that we were present for a performance of 'La fete des vigneron 2019' at Vevey. As we had gathered at the auditorium we didn't quite know what to expect. Over the following three hours we were quite simply blown away by the extraordinary performance that we witnessed. At one point there were over five thousand performers on view at the same time, all in costume, accompanied by four choirs. It was an amazing evening to be remembered, all the more as it had not been in our original holiday itinerary. When we returned home we spoke of what we had seen and heard to any who were willing to listen politely!

Peter had not expected the Transfiguration of Christ to happen. But when it did he was swept up in the event so that later he could tell everybody what he had seen and heard. He had been there and it made all the difference both to him and the church.

Read 2 Peter 1:16-18

¹⁶ For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. ¹⁷ For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," ¹⁸ we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain.

Peter was a comparatively young man when he experienced the event of the Transfiguration. As we shall see it was something that remained with him until the very end of his days. As he drew near to the end of his life he even referred to his death as his departure (2 Peter 1:15) but the word he actually uses is the same as the one Jesus used at the Transfiguration - his exodus (Luke 9:31; 2 Peter 1:15). Peter is not just aware of his forthcoming death but is looking forward to the goal of his 'exodus', the abundant welcome 'into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ' (2 Peter 1:11).

The reason that he is writing, however, is that God's people are facing a serious challenge. False teachers have entered the church (2 Peter 2:1). Simply put, their message was that the Lord Jesus would not be returning - it was simply a 'myth' (2 Peter 1:16). Therefore there would be no judgement coming at the end of

history (2 Peter 3:3,4) and consequently the moral boundaries for living could safely be moved without any unpleasant repercussions. No return ... no judgement ... no boundaries. It all sounds to have a very contemporary ring to it!

In order to combat such pernicious teaching Peter adopts a threefold strategy. At the beginning and end of his epistle he rebuilds confidence in the believers that the Lord Jesus will return and that their great purpose is to live for Him (2 Peter 1:1-11; 3:11-18). Second, he rebuilds confidence that God's word in both the Old and the New Testament can be trusted in this area (2 Peter 1:12-21; 3:1-10). Third, at the centre, on the basis of the trustworthiness of God's word, he shows how such false teaching has always led to God's judgement (2 Peter 2:1-22).

Fascinatingly for our purposes, the main Gospel incident that Peter relies upon in his argument is the Transfiguration and so he reminds his hearers in order that they can remember what happened (2 Peter 1:12-15). In the Gospel accounts, the Transfiguration occurs directly after Jesus' promise to return 'in the glory of His Father' (Matthew 16:27). It provided reassurance to the disciples, including Peter, that what He had taught about His return was completely trustworthy ('Listen to Him!') and that His glorious identity was fully in keeping with His role as King and Judge. It is no accident

then that in order to dispel the notion that the return of Christ was a 'cleverly devised myth' he also turns to the Transfiguration. Prove that the Transfiguration occurred and all the ingredients for an understanding of the return of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ are in place.

So, notice what Peter says. He and the other two disciples were eyewitnesses (2 Peter 1:16). They saw what happened. Further they were 'ear witnesses' - they heard the voice that spoke to them about Jesus (2 Peter 1:18). They were with Him on the holy mountain. Their eyewitness evidence was not simply for themselves but, as we can see here, was to be of permanent assistance for the church for all time. Their testimony helps to rebuild confidence that the record of God's word is completely reliable and that it testifies to Christ's glory and honour which we know now by faith and will one day see by sight.

Ultimately the choice that the church faced was between the 'false words' (2 Peter 2:3) or fabricated stories of the false teachers and the 'cleverly devised myths' (2 Peter 1:16) that it was alleged Peter was teaching about the return of Christ. The choice is resolved by the apostle Peter's eyewitness testimony about the Transfiguration. How vital, therefore, is this teaching within the New Testament. In Peter's hands we see that the Transfiguration is an absolutely vital bulwark in protecting the church from both doctrinal

and subsequent moral error. If we don't listen to the eyewitness evidence of the apostles, we'll end up listening to anything.

Reflection and prayer on 2 Peter 1:16,18

- Why is the denial of the personal return of Christ to judge such a serious error? What are the implications of getting things wrong at this point?
- In what ways does the eyewitness evidence of the Gospels help to strengthen your own confidence in Christ?
- How can we encourage others to have greater confidence in the reliability and trustworthiness of God's word?

*Almighty God,
you show to those who are in error the light of your truth,
that they may return to the way of righteousness:
grant to all those who are admitted
into the fellowship of Christ's religion,
that they may reject those things
that are contrary to their profession,
and follow all such things as are agreeable to the same;
through our Lord Jesus Christ,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.*

(Collect for The Second Sunday of Lent)

Day 14 : 2 Peter 1:17

Glory be to Jesus!

Introduction

The holiday had been years ago. Yet its essence had been captured in a photograph which stands in an old, slightly battered wooden frame that has rested on a ledge in my study for several decades. The subject of the image is my wife, steering a boat across a small stretch of water. The wind has caught her hair and there is a wide smile across her face. It's a totally informal shot which no doubt could and should have been more expertly taken by the photographer (me!). Perhaps for others it would appear to be yet another totally unremarkable holiday snap. But for me it captures her beauty, joy and love. It freezes into a few square inches who she is and what she continues to mean to me.

Peter had no camera or video equipment to record the events of the Transfiguration. Yet his memory was clearly imprinted with the most wonderful sight. Using his favourite ascription in 2 Peter, he speaks of 'our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ'. This image had burned into his soul.

Read 2 Peter 1:16-17

¹⁶ For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. ¹⁷ For when he

received honour and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

As an older man Peter encountered false teachers emerging within the church who denied Christ as their Sovereign Lord (2 Peter 2:1). How was it possible for leaders to act in such a way? Yet Peter had travelled that very same path himself.

'I do not know this man' (Mark 14:71). These are the astonishing and desperately sad words that came from the lips of Peter on the night Jesus was arrested. Instead of honouring Christ he had denied Him. Luke records the moment when Jesus looked across the courtyard straight at Peter and he immediately broke down in tears (Luke 22:61,62). Of course Peter knew Jesus and through God's mercy he would be brought back into a close walk with Him, in which he would learn to treasure everything to do with the Lord Jesus as *precious* (1 Peter 1:19; 2:4,6,7).

Indeed, the theme of knowing Jesus and growing in the knowledge of Christ would become the key thought that he would develop in his final letter to the church. Each of the New Testament authors has a distinctive vocabulary, but for Peter becoming a Christian is about coming to know Jesus. 'May grace and peace be multiplied to you in the *knowledge* of God and of Jesus.

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the *knowledge* of him who called us to his own glory and excellence' (2 Peter 1:2,3). Further, growing as a Christian is about increasing in the *knowledge* of Jesus (2 Peter 1:8). Finally, the culmination of the Christian life is all about meeting the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Peter 1:11) on that great day when knowing Christ by faith will turn to sight. Knowing Jesus personally as our Lord and Saviour is central. No wonder he sums up everything with his final call for believers to 'grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ' (2 Peter 3:18). What a change from that sad day when Peter had defined himself as someone who didn't know Jesus, to his final days when his identity had become completely wrapped up with knowing Christ and encouraging others to grow in their knowledge of Him.

And who is this Jesus whom Peter speaks about? He is the One who is the focus of His own Father's attention. Peter recalls the words of the voice that he heard on the mountain as, literally, 'My Son! My beloved!' (2 Peter 1:17). That is how the Father constantly regards His Son, delighting and rejoicing in Him - He loves Him! And if that is how our Heavenly Father views His Son the strong implication is that this should make an impact on how we also regard Jesus. Do you love Him?

Many will remember the famous interview with Bert

Le Clos after his son, Chad, had won a gold medal in the 200m butterfly at the London 2012 Olympics. Bert, the father, simply could not contain himself. 'He's my son! He's so beautiful!' The words, smiles and tears left no one in any doubt about the love of father for son. How much more the love of the Father for His Son. Such love is not a cool, constrained emotion. Nor should our love for Christ be simply formal. It should be an ever-growing passion for Christ given all that He is and all that He has done.

It is one thing to look at Jesus in all His glory as Lord. It is another then to listen attentively to His word, hearing His call which will bring us to Him in glory. Yet ultimately knowing Jesus should lead to loving Him. The title 'Saviour' is actually only used concerning the Lord Jesus sixteen times within the New Testament. Remarkably five of those occurrences fall within 2 Peter (1:1,11; 2:20; 3:2,18). Through His sacrificial death Jesus has saved His people and our response is not simply to trust and follow Him but to love Him. Peter loved Jesus. His greatest sadness was to see others fail to give the honour and majesty that Jesus deserved. His greatest joy was to see glory being brought to Christ.

Reflection and prayer on 2 Peter 1:16,17

- To what extent does the Father's view of Jesus shape your own?
- What are the ways that we can encourage ourselves and others around us to look at, listen to and love our Lord Jesus?
- How, with the Father's help, will you determine in the coming days to give Jesus the honour and glory that He deserves?

*God our creator,
who in the beginning
commanded the light to shine out of darkness:
we pray that the light of the glorious gospel of Christ
may dispel the darkness of ignorance and unbelief,
shine into the hearts of all your people,
and reveal the knowledge of your glory
in the face of Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen*

(Collect for The Fourth Sunday of Epiphany)

