

Sermon: Matthew 17:1-9, The Transfiguration

Sequels! Or difficult second albums. Bad ones? Jaws 2, Evan Almighty, Speed 2. Albums: After *Rumours* by Fleetwood Mac (sold 40 million), Tusk was always going to be in its shadow (sold 4 million). Good ones? Toy Story 2 and 3, Harry Potter gets better and better?

Intro/Context (Matt 16):

Sequels are important because they can be held in so much anticipation based on how good the first film or music release was the first time round.

When it comes to the Transfiguration, I've known about it for ages, but until I came to writing this sermon, wasn't really sure just what the point of it was! [Why have we got this weird bit in the middle of Jesus' ministry where he's up a hill with his mates and he starts glowing like the sun?!]

In a way, the Transfiguration is a teaser to the incredible part two. It is a link between part one: Jesus' death, and part two: the resurrection.

Main point: The transfiguration provides us with a connection between Jesus' death and his resurrection.

VERSE 1: After six days since what? Peter has just declared that Jesus is the Messiah/The Anointed/Someone special chosen to do something special, having been asked by Jesus the famous question: "Who do you say I am?" Having got 10 house points for a correct answer (The Messiah), in Peter's true style, he gets rebuked by Jesus for then saying that Jesus won't be killed.

In the previous chapter there is an opening up of what it means that Jesus is crucified and raised to life. 16.21: From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. Part one; Jesus' death. Part two; Jesus' resurrection.

This explanation of Jesus' death and resurrection doesn't just map his life. It mirrors the instructions for how those who follow him are to live: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it."

This blending of seemingly paradoxical instructions – losing life to find it – gives us a helpful place to begin to unpack and understand the Transfiguration.

So, up a mountain Jesus goes, with three of his trusted friends: Peter, James and John.

Here Jesus is changed, metamorphosized with his face like the sun and clothes as white as light. There is an unmistakable resonance with Moses experiencing the glory of God on the cloud-covered Mount Sinai in Exodus 24.

I imagine that for the disciples it might have been like that moment you come out of a film at the cinema into broad daylight, or when you turn the bathroom light on in the middle of the night! But instead of just light, there before them is Jesus in resplendent glory.

Not only is Jesus standing in front of the disciples, but Moses and Elijah turn up too! As is clear from the ending of the episode (which we didn't quite get to), where Jesus is alone again with the three disciples, the point is not a change in Jesus, but a change in their understanding of who he is. For now, this understanding of who Jesus is, is enhanced by Moses and Elijah appearing.

When it comes to Moses and Elijah, there is an uncanny end to both of their lives. Moses' body was never found, with the assumption that God took him. Elijah was whisked from earth in a chariot and horses of fire. For Jews at that time, there was a strong expectation that a prophet like Moses or Elijah would rise up, and here we see, maybe not in the way they expected, this coming true. The Lord was coming; he was in their midst! Moses and Elijah are standing round Jesus, almost as if pointing at him, their presence with Jesus an anticipation of Jesus' own conquest of death.

With all this going on, why would Peter think a spot of camping is a good idea?! I've been camping a fair bit, and camping is brilliant: at one with nature, soaking up the outdoors, getting back to basics. You get to buy expensive kit like knives and headtorches that make you feel like you're Ernest Shackleton or Ranulph Fiennes out on the tundra. Whereas in reality you're in a slightly sloping field in Wales and you've got an electric hook up, and a tap and shower block just a short walk away. All that is lovely, until you consider that the UK is well-known for how much it rains. So, when, as has happened to me, there is a stream of rainwater running through your tent, or you're awake at 4am wrestling the flailing guy ropes from what feels like force 10 storm, or playing dot-to-dot with your midge bites, camping seems like a terrible idea.

In Peter's defence, prophets, and rabbis after them, were sensitive to the fact that God dwelt with Israel in tents, like the tabernacle. If that's how God met with people then, surely it makes sense to do so again and commemorate the occasion? But Jesus is not just one of three important figures, alongside Moses and Abraham. *Jesus alone* is the Son and the one who displays the glory of God. Nor has Jesus come to dwell on a mountain but for a time on earth, then by the Holy Spirit in our hearts. This is emphasised by what happens in the next verse. Before Peter can finish his sentence, there is a voice from the cloud, with strong echoes of Jesus' baptism. The voice is that of the Father because it addresses Jesus as 'Son', and the Father underlines the point that Moses and Elijah are making: Jesus is the focus, he bears the adoration of the Father, and there is an imperative to hear what he has to say.

Moses and Elijah's presence, and the Father's voice seal approval over what Jesus has just said about his death and resurrection. If Peter was still in any doubt about the validity of what Jesus was saying, he wouldn't have been any longer. Just as Peter is pulling out the Trangia stove, his idea quickly amounts to nothing as Moses and Elijah fade away leaving just Jesus standing there. Again, the point isn't the change in Jesus, but the change in understanding of who he is and what he has come to do.

Jesus' death was coming: part one. The sequel, His raising to life, conquering of death and sin, is part two. Just in case the disciples were in any doubt that part two might happen, there is assurance of this in the foretaste of Jesus' divine glory in the transfiguration.

We know Jesus was resurrected, so we have seen both parts of the story. I'm not saying that our understanding of the cross and resurrection are complete or 'done and dusted' just because we have them written and recorded in scripture.

For us, there is a different challenge to that of the disciples. Yes, Jesus was changed in the transfiguration, but what does that change mean for us? How do we respond? How do we live in the reality of Jesus' death and resurrection? Just as Jesus has dealt with our sin on the cross and put away the control of death as a separation from God in the resurrection, we are to respond by doing likewise. Whoever wants to save their life must lose it; whoever loses their life for Jesus will find it.

To some extent, we might have quite a Victorian view of what it means to sacrifice things for our faith. We know we should die to our desires but I think this can often come in the shape of thinking we just need to stop being indulgent and start behaving: stop touching that, don't look there, sit down, be quiet, comb your hair, say your prayers. Don't get me wrong, there is good reason to deny ourselves, but doing so out of fear of some kind of view of God as a tyrannical headteacher isn't a good reason.

Losing our lives is only half the story, only part one. Part two, finding life, is just as important. When we surrender to God's commands, we die to our own desires. When we live according to God's plan, like a seed dying to bring new life, we experience the life-giving nature of his design for our lives. None of us would be here if we weren't told as kids how to cross the road. But we were told how to cross the road so we could get to the park to climb trees or kick or football around or get to our friend's house and experience the joy of life. Living in God's design for our lives as those who put our sin to death and live in the joy and freedom of God's gracious forgiveness reflects both Jesus' death and resurrection. Where will you find life if you put something to death?

Joy in a new friendship if you put your reputation to death and invite someone to Christianity Explored? Intimacy with your spouse if you turn the TV off or close the laptop? Energy and vitality when food is no longer an idol? What about the joy of delighting in your own gifts and skills as God's precious child instead of bowing to crushing expectations imposed on yourself or from other? To some extent I'm simplifying things, but there are habits and pride in all our lives that strangle joy, life and freedom. Choose to put them to death and find life.

Conclusion

Part one: Jesus' death. Jesus was clear he was going to die. Part two: Jesus' resurrection. The transfiguration is the pledge, the foretaste of the resurrected Jesus.

Life in God calls us to respond with our own death and resurrection, dying to sin and living in Jesus.

Amen.