The Transfiguration of Jesus

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[0:00] As we stand, let's pray together. Heavenly Father, as those men came to Jesus, his disciples with that request, so we would see Jesus.

So we pray this morning that we might glimpse the glory of our Saviour and live in the light of that all the days of our lives. In his name we pray. Amen.
Well, do please be seated. We're in Matthew chapter 17, those first nine verses. I wonder as you look back on your life whether there are moments that stand out because you were there for something absolutely historic.
Maybe you just happened to be spending a few days in Liverpool as four young men with interesting haircuts picked up their instruments for their first concert and you thought, I wonder if anything will ever come of them.
Maybe you were at Woodstock hanging out with all the flower people. Or maybe you were in Berlin when the wall came down. Or in London for the royal wedding. Or when the death of the Queen was announced.
[1:05] Moments like that, historic moments, stay with us, don't they? That was certainly true for Peter and John. James, the third disciple who heads up the mountain with Jesus in our passage, was martyred not long after the day of Pentecost.

But Peter and John cherished that moment. So much so that they both wrote about it in their books that appear in the scriptures. Peter speaks of it in 2 Peter chapter 1.
He writes this. John refers to it in the first chapter of his gospel.
Well, you'll know these words. We hear them every Christmas. The word became flesh and made his dwelling amongst us. We have seen his glory. The glory of the one and only Son who came from the Father full of grace and truth.
Well, this morning we get to share this extraordinary moment with them. And think about not only why it had such a big impact on them, but how it might have such a powerful impact on us.
[2:25] But first of all, let's have a think a little about the context. If you've got your Bibles open and you flick back a page, you'll see that two extraordinary events happen in chapter 16.

Firstly, Peter became the first disciple to publicly declare that Jesus was the Messiah. And then, for the first time, directly after that, Jesus takes his disciples aside and explains to them all that would happen to him when they arrived in Jerusalem.
How he would be arrested, killed, yet on the third day rise to life again. Of course, at this point, Peter blots his copybook a little, doesn't he? He takes Jesus aside to himself and says, let me tell you all the reasons why that's not going to happen.
He says something similarly foolish in this chapter as well. But I think we'll have to excuse him for both of those. Firstly, because at this point in the gospel, he has no idea how things are going to turn out.
And in chapter 17, he is clearly terrified with what he sees. But it's this exchange that sets the scene for what follows later.
[3:38] Because Jesus takes Peter, James and John up a mountain to be alone with him. And these ideas of his true identity and his ultimate mission are still in their minds.

Now, if you head on a tour to the Holy Land, I don't know whether any of you have ever done that. Some tours will take you to one mountain and other tours will take you to another mountain.
No one's quite sure which mountain the transfiguration happened on. Actually, that's immaterial. Because what's not up for debate is what happened. What are they seeing?
Well, at that moment, the disciples are seeing Jesus as he truly is. The divine son of God in all his eternal glory.

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For most of Jesus' time on earth, Jesus' glory is hidden beneath the veil of his humanity. If you remember the story from the Old Testament, as Moses goes into the tabernacle once they are wandering around in the deserts, he has these regular encounters with God.
[4:54] It changes him so much that he has to wear a veil over his face. Remember that? The veil hides who he is. Well, in a similar kind of way, Jesus' humanity veils his glory from the world.

Of course, his glory still seeps out. We see it as he talks and teaches with divine authority. We see it as he heals the sick, as he gives sight to the blind, calms storms, raises the dead, forgives sins. In all these things, the glory of Jesus is revealed. But it's seen in what he does, not in who he is. But on the mountain, the true glory that Jesus has in himself is suddenly made visible.
It's as if a pair of curtains are suddenly drawn back to reveal the brightest of sunrises. Maybe you can't remember one of those. We haven't had one for a while, have we? But imagine for a moment, after a run of dark, dreary days and the darkest of nights, you go downstairs, you pull back the blackout curtains, and you are blinded by the light as the sun streams in.
Only, of course, on that mountain, it wasn't the sun, S-U-N, that dazzled the disciples. It was the sun, S-O-N, whose glory and majesty shone before them.
[6:17] And maybe that's not surprising. The writer of Psalm 104 speaks of God in this way, the Lord wraps himself in light as with a garment. On the Mount of Transfiguration, the disciples saw that for themselves.

They saw the glory of Jesus. Of course, that's not the only thing that happens, is it? Because suddenly two other people are there talking with Jesus.
In Luke's account, we're told that they were speaking about Jesus' departure, which means his death, his resurrection, his ultimate ascension back to heaven. Maybe during that conversation, Jesus used their names.
That's how the disciples knew who they were. But however they found out, this is a moment of great significance in biblical history. This is one of those occasions where we see the Old Testament and the New Testament, not just standing near each other, but overlapping.
You see, all of the Old Testament, all of the prophets represented here by Elijah, points forward to Jesus. And all of the laws, all of God's great saving works, symbolised here by Moses, points forward to the sacrifice Jesus would make and the rescue he would bring about.
[7:31] It all ties wonderfully together in Jesus. You can't have the two separate. They must belong together. Maybe you've heard this little saying about the Bible, the old is in the new concealed, the new is in the old revealed.

Sorry, the wrong way around. The new is in the old concealed, the old is in the new revealed. All 66 books tie together and point us to Jesus.
Both Testaments speak of Jesus. We need Old Testament and New Testament to understand God's glorious purposes. Peter doesn't quite get it, does he? He's one of those people, maybe you know someone like this, who speaks before really engaging their brain.
He did that back in chapter 16. We've seen that already. He'll do that later in the Gospels when he makes a very rash promise. Mark excuses him here by making clear just how terrified he is.
But perhaps we can understand Peter's desire to hold on to this moment, to build these shelters so Jesus and Moses and Elijah hang around for a bit longer.
[8:42] It's too good. He doesn't want this moment to end. There they are talking with Jesus, these two great heroes from the Old Testament. There is such a glorious light shining that it takes your breath away and Peter doesn't want to let it go.

He wants to hold on and stay there. I think we would too. We would too. We would, ha, it's not going to get any better than this.
But such a permanent gathering with Jesus in all his glory will have to wait till he returns at the end of the age. Right then there was work for Jesus to do.
There was a mission for him to complete. There was a death he had to die and a victory he needed to win. So all of a sudden Peter's foolish musings were cut short as a cloud envelops them and then a voice terrifies them.
While he was still speaking, that's Peter, a bright cloud covered them and a voice from the cloud said, this is my son whom I love. With him I am well pleased.
[9:49] Listen to him. Something similar happens in Exodus chapter 20. After God speaks from the cloud of smoke and fire covering Mount Sinai and he has given the people the Ten

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Commandments, the people are terrified too.

That's why they sent Moses up the mountain on his own. So you go talk to him. It's too scary for us. On that day, the voice of God proclaimed commands to be followed and that happens here as well, doesn't it?
Only this time, the voice of the Father firstly commends Jesus as his beloved son and then he gives not just ten commands but just one. Listen to him.
Cowering on the ground with the clouds surrounding the voice of God in their ears, as well as the disciples were obviously utterly petrified. Maybe they were fearing this moment would be their last when all of a sudden the voice stops, the cloud lifts and there standing before them is Jesus. Touching them on the shoulder, speaking those words words of peace, get up, don't be afraid.
None of the gospel writers actually tell us how long this event encounter lasted.
[11:14] Maybe a few minutes, maybe a few hours, we don't know. But it was clear that it had a dramatic effect on the disciples. So maybe it's no surprise that Jesus said don't say anything about this until I have risen from the dead.

Not that they understood what rising from the dead meant at that point. It was such a momentous thing to see and hear and experience that it would need the resurrection, the mystery of the ascension to help make sense of it.
It's only as Jesus' ministry comes to an end that the disciples can start to put together all those things and grasp that glorious truth that the one they had followed for three and a half years, eating, drinking with him, hanging around with him, walking from town to town, was not just a great teacher or a marvellous prophet or an incredible miracle worker, but God himself.
The human veil that hid Jesus' true glorious divinity was pulled away for a brief few moments on that mountain. And for that little while the disciples saw just who Jesus truly was.
And in the light of all that, light of all that followed, that time on the mountain became one of those moments that they would treasure and remember their whole lives through.
[12:34] So how does this encourage us? Well, it reminds us that the Jesus we follow is the Lord of all glory. These days, I don't meet many people who doubt that Jesus of Nazareth ever existed.

There are still one or two weird people who have listened to something on the internet and I'm sure that's the truth, but generally, they are few and far between. Almost everyone now believes Jesus existed because he did.
And most of them are happy to believe too that Jesus was a great teacher. Maybe even someone that had some incredible powers to do good things. But they leave it there.
He was a man. Okay. A special man. Fair enough. An influential man. Absolutely. A man whose teachings they would love to see everyone follow. Yeah, okay. But that's it.
But that's not what the Bible teaches, is it? It's not the faith we have just professed in the creeds.
And that's just as well because if Jesus is just a man, then there is no hope for us.
[13:38] But there is great hope, great comfort, if, as this encounter shows us, that Jesus truly is the glorious, all-powerful, fully divine, Son of the Father.

See, only if Jesus is fully God could he live a perfect life, die the death that would win our forgiveness. Only if Jesus is fully God could he defeat death, rise from the grave, and promise eternal life to all those who follow him.
Only if Jesus is fully God can he bring us with him by his prayers into access with the Father. Only if he is fully God can he give us the Holy Spirit as our comforter.
Only if Jesus is fully God can he fulfil his promise to be with us always, now, until the end of the age, and say, one day you will join me in my kingdom.
On the Mount of Transfiguration we see who Jesus is. Brothers and sisters, we need to let this glorious vision of Jesus in all his glory settle into our hearts, thrilling us with the thought that one day, just as the disciples did, you and I will see him face to face.
[14:53] Can you get your head round that? One day, you and I will see him like this. As we follow our crucified but risen saviour, we don't follow a weak God unable to save us or comfort us or answer our prayers.

We follow the God of divine majesty whose glory was revealed on the mountain. Be encouraged by that. But there's a challenge here for us as well, isn't there?
See, if we follow the Lord of all glory, our response to him must be to do what the voice on the mountain said. The voice of God the Father told his disciples, this is my son, listen to him.

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And of course, listening isn't just hearing the words, is it? It's hearing the words and believing Jesus' words and then putting them into practice, living them out, believing them, obeying them, all of them.
I'm sure we don't like every law our government passes, but as citizens of this nation, our responsibility is to obey them or face the consequences.
[16:03] God's authority is far greater than that of his majesty's government. The glory of Jesus is greater than any of that of worldly leaders and the consequences of rejecting Jesus' authority is far more serious.

If we're following Jesus, then we need to listen to him, believe what he says, do what he commands. So as we head towards Lent, this time of inner reflection, let me encourage you, along with other things that you might be doing, to spend some time reflecting on the words of Jesus. Think to yourself, are there some that I have struggled to believe and trouble to obey? Bring those to God honestly and repent from that position. Let's not stand on our pride.
Let's not argue that we know better than God. Let's do what the voice from heaven told us to do, to believe in the one whose glory was revealed and who loved us so much that he was willing to give up his life on the cross that one day you and I might share his glory and see him face to face.
May we do that. Amen.

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