
Undoubtedly the Messiah

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 6 August 2023

Exodus 34:29-35 • 2 Peter 1:16-21 • Luke 9:28-36



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

When Jesus first appeared on earth, as we know from Luke's Gospel, his coming was announced by angels. Shepherds heard the good news and rushed to find the baby lying in the manger. Mary, who had been told by the archangel Gabriel that her child would be no ordinary child, was still astonished by what the shepherds and later the Wise Men told her about him — you may recall she “pondered these things in her heart.” And we have a few other stories about Jesus during his childhood.

But after that, the people who lived in that area seem to have lost track of the miraculous baby and the child, and then the man, which he became. When Jesus begins his ministry, around age 30 we believe, he was not known to be anything other than the carpenter's son. And so he began to proclaim the good news of salvation and to talk about his relationship to his Father. Most people seemed to doubt his word. So this question became important: Who is this man, this Jesus? What is he? Why does he say these things about God as his Father?

His disciples doubted as much as anyone. Although they willingly followed him, recognising in him a great teacher or rabbi, it took a long time for them to understand just who he really was.

This was important to Jesus. In the Lukan passage shortly before our reading today, Jesus asks the disciples,

‘Who do the crowds say that I am?’ ¹⁹ They answered, ‘John the Baptist; but others, Elijah; and still others, that one of the ancient prophets has arisen.’ ²⁰ He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Peter answered, ‘The Messiah ^{bl} of God.’ (Luke 9:18-19)

Jesus wants to know how his people are receiving his teaching, and Peter has the right idea. But not all the disciples are up with him, and many of the people Jesus meets do not understand. “Who is this man? How does he do these things?” And today, people still ask, “Who is Jesus Christ?”

This is what the event we call the Transfiguration is about. Jesus is transfigured — “the appearance of his face [is] changed, and his clothes became dazzling white” (Luke 9:29). For a few moments he shows the glory of God, or at least a little taste of it, for the full glory of God may not be seen by human eyes. A little bit of God’s power shows through the human body of Jesus. He wants to show the three disciples, Peter, John and James, who he really is. It is a wonderful scene, Jesus shining with the light of heaven, talking to two of the most important figures in all of our history, Moses and Elijah. It seems that Jesus is consulting with them. Perhaps they are helping him to plan his great mission of salvation. Significantly, both Moses and Elijah are also “in glorious splendour,” dazzling the eye, just as Jesus is. So what do we make of this astonishing occurrence?

First, as I said, it shows the disciples (and us) who Jesus really is. He is not just a man, not just a rabbi. The disciples have been realising this, and if we could again read the Bible for the first time, with fresh eyes and minds, the story of the Transfiguration would strike us as the first major demonstration of Jesus’ power and of his identity. If we, like the disciples, know our Hebrew scriptures, we would immediately think of the passage from Exodus which was our first reading today. Moses talks to God as one person to another and may even have a glimpse of his face. When Moses comes down from the mountain, his face is shining with reflected glory, but it would have been only a pale imitation of Jesus’ face as he stood talking to Moses and Elijah. This gives us a taste of how Jesus will look when we come face to face with him in the hereafter.

Next, consider the other two who appear with Jesus: Moses and Elijah. If you are a Jew, you revere these two. Their appearance with Jesus connects him to the

Hebrew scriptures. It gives Jesus a legitimacy and places him firmly in the line of the great prophets. Of course Jesus is more than a great prophet, and greater than either of the other two; but the disciples learn something here: Jesus is apparently greater than we thought! Also, Elijah's presence may foretell the end times, which will occur after Jesus' second coming; and the prophet Malachi prophesied that Elijah would return just before the end: "See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes" (Malachi 4:5).

I do sometimes wonder: how did the disciples know that it was Moses and Elijah? They had never seen them, and they didn't have photographs in those days. It can only have been by direct revelation, unless Jesus told them and Luke just didn't report it.

Finally, Luke tells us that the three talked about Jesus' departure. He was on his way to Jerusalem to complete his mission. Wouldn't it be interesting to know exactly what they said to each other! One likes to think that Moses and Elijah were giving Jesus words of encouragement for the difficult task he had to do. Surely God was speaking through them to his Son, the Son he is so proud of. And God himself speaks in a voice the disciples can hear: "This is my Son, my chosen; listen to him!" There can be no doubt, with the three disciples or with us, about who Jesus is.

Later, the disciples keep quiet about what they have seen. In Matthew and Mark's telling of the story,

Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. They kept the matter to themselves (Mark 9:9-10).

This follows a pattern where Jesus often told those who saw his miracles not to tell other people about them, most likely because he wanted people to focus on God, and not on himself. Jesus is always pointing to God. And in this instance, when he is transfigured, the focus is still on God, emphasised by God's voice out of the cloud.

We should view the Transfiguration as a decisive act of God to identify Jesus as his Son and to establish him as the Messiah, beyond any doubt. As the Messiah, Jesus is grounded in the history of God's actions for the world, from creation through to the end times to come. May God bless us and help us to follow his beloved Son ever more closely. Amen.