

Jesus transformed

11 February 2024 – Transfiguration Sunday

INTRODUCING TODAY'S THEME

I really like mountains ... seeing them, climbing them – they seem so big and evocative stretching up towards the sky – like the high jagged mountains of New Zealand.

Jesus liked mountains too and we're told that he often went there to pray to God. One day he climbed up a tall mountain with three of his best friends. And while he was up there on the mountain something changed in how Jesus looked – it was all a bit scary but also amazing. And then a cloud came over the mountain and a voice started talking about Jesus and that they should **listen** to Jesus.



It was a bit confusing as well as a bit frightening.

Then everything changed again and it was just Jesus with them, coming over and saying it was time to go back down the mountain.

These sorts of experiences – where we feel very close to God and where the world seems to just stop for a moment and we see things differently – are sometimes called ... **mountain top experiences** – based on this story!

They can happen to anyone, but not every day. Maybe once or twice in our lives. But when they do happen, they can change our lives – as well as giving us lots to think about.

BIBLE READINGS

Your word, O Lord, is a lamp to our feet
and a light to our path.

Exodus 24:12-19, 34:29-32

The Lord said to Moses, ‘Come up to me on the mountain and stay here, and I will give you the tablets of stone with the law and commandments I have written for their instruction.’

Then Moses set out with Joshua his assistant, and Moses went up on the mountain of God. ... When Moses went up on the mountain, the cloud covered it, and the glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai. For six days the cloud covered the mountain, and

on the seventh day the Lord called to Moses from within the cloud. To the Israelites the glory of the Lord looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain. Then Moses entered the cloud as he went up the mountain. And he stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights.

When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the covenant law in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the Lord. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, his face was radiant, and they were afraid to come near him. But Moses called to them; so Aaron and all the leaders of the community came back to him, and he spoke to them. Afterwards all the Israelites came near him, and he gave them all the commands the Lord had given him on Mount Sinai.

Mark 9:2-9

After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus.

Peter said to Jesus, ‘Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters – one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.’ (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.)

Then a cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud: ‘This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!’

Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

**Lord, may your word live in us
and bear much fruit to your glory.**

MESSAGE Jesus transformed

What an extraordinary passage! Especially in this Gospel of Mark that generally presents a very down-to-earth and very human Jesus.

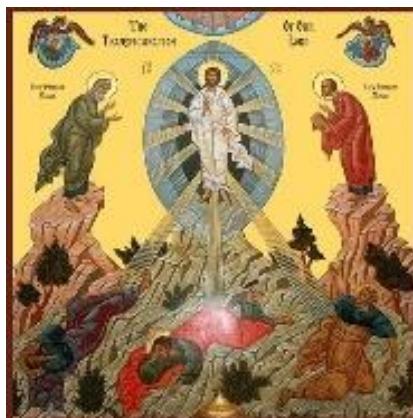
The language is very sensory – it's about what the disciples see and hear and feel – it's evocative, mysterious, far removed from everyday experience.

The whole story seems deliberately symbolic – set on a mountain top, with a cloud appearing, Jesus shining with dazzling light, God speaking, the presence of Moses and Elijah – recalling images and key stories from Israel's past.



And Jesus, the hero of Mark's story, is standing right there in the middle of the stage but not really doing much or saying much at all.

Let's have a quick look at how various artists have captured this scene ...



What these various images are trying to capture is a theophany – an experience where God's presence and glory is visible and felt – where just for a short time the curtains into the spiritual realm are pulled back and we have a glimpse of the eternal splendor of God.

I remember the first time I came across this passage in a young adult Bible study. We weren't well equipped to engage with the passage and the fairly confused conclusion that we came to was that this passage seemed to be really important, but we weren't sure quite what it meant for Mark or for us.

Perhaps, though, we weren't so far off track. The passage is written from the

perspective of the three disciples – Peter, James and John – who went with Jesus up the mountain, with Mark writing down Peter’s later reflections.

What Peter recalls is a mix of awe, astonishment, fear and confusion.

If we fast forward to the very end of Mark’s Gospel for a moment, these same emotions are front and centre for the women who go to the empty tomb and are greeted by an angel telling them that Jesus has risen. Mark writes that:

The women fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. (Mark 16:8)

Often at the start of our worship, we pray that God would draw near and speak to us. Yet the evidence of Scripture is that this is quite a brave prayer, because if God did indeed choose to draw near and speak to us directly we may well be gob-smacked but also rather confused and frightened.

I should probably stop at this point, but here are a few further thoughts we might like to ponder.

First is the symbolism.

In the ancient world, heaven and the place of the gods was considered to be up in the sky somewhere. Mountains are tall and therefore were considered to be closer to heaven. They are likely places to encounter God.

Today we might call them thin places.

In Israel’s Scriptures, God met with Moses on Mt Sinai, with God’s presence coming down as thick cloud and fire. Moses and Joshua go up the mountain as we read earlier in the passage from Exodus, and God speaks to Moses.



Eventually Moses comes down the mountain with the two stone tablets of the Ten Commandments, his face glowing, having spent time in God’s presence and seeing God’s glory. You know the story, you’ve seen the movie.

Elijah also met with God on a high mountain and was overcome with awe and fear as God speaks with him.

Many of these same elements are included in Mark’s story – a high mountain, a

cloud, God's voice speaking, a glimpse of God's light and glory shining out from Jesus, and a response of both fear and awe.

There are also echoes of several other stories from Scripture.

Moses and Elijah share several aspects beyond meeting God on a mountain.

In Jewish thought, both are assumed to live on in God's presence in heaven as Moses was never buried and Elijah is taken up to heaven in a whirlwind.

Both are associated with God's plans for the end times. In Deuteronomy, God promises to raise up a prophet like Moses whom the people must listen to. While in the book of Malachi, the last book in our Old Testament, the prophet writes that Elijah must return before the great and terrible day of the Lord and lead the people to repentance.

Jesus tells Peter, James and John as they are coming down from the mountain that Elijah has indeed come – in the person of John the Baptist – who was persecuted by King Herod and his wife Herodias in a similar way that Elijah suffered under King Ahab and Jezebel.

If we follow these echoes of Scripture, then Jesus is the end-time prophet like Moses, who speaks the words of God, and to whom people must listen.

Moses also had regular experience of being rejected by God's people.

This scene on the mountain points us to some of these stories of Moses and Elijah, which help illuminate the story of Jesus in the Gospel.

Next is the significance of this episode in Mark's story.

In the episode immediately before today's passage, that reappears in the second week of Lent in a couple of weeks' time, Peter recognises and names Jesus as the long awaited and hoped for Messiah, yet struggles to comprehend how Jesus the Messiah could possibly be rejected, suffer and die.

This story, along with today's story on the mountain, serve as the pivot or turning point as Jesus now begins to journey towards Jerusalem and the events of Easter.

It's why this reading is placed here in the church calendar as we transition to Lent and Jesus' journey to the cross.



In today's episode, the highest authority in the story – the voice of God – affirms Jesus as God's beloved Son – recalling what is said at Jesus' baptism – but now adds the new demand that the disciples must listen to Jesus.

They must listen when Jesus talks of being rejected,
listen when Jesus talks about walking the road of suffering,
listen when Jesus talks of the demands of following him.
These are all part of God's plans for Jesus.

This roadmap for Jesus the beloved Son of God, Messiah and Prophet like Moses was hard if not incomprehensible for Peter and the other disciples to grasp.

It's hard for us to grasp as well.

We much prefer to help and serve others and often try to avoid walking Jesus' path of suffering. We struggle to get our heads around Jesus' call to take up our cross and follow.

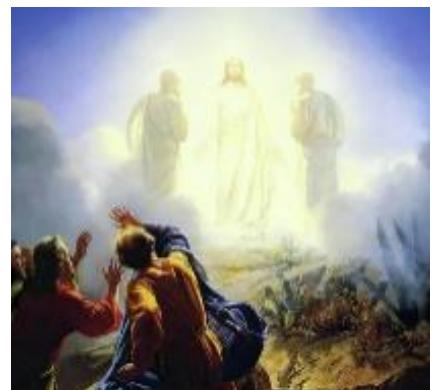
So it's not just Jesus who was transformed on the mountain in the sight of the disciples. They too had to be transformed and changed. The apostle Paul puts it this way in the book of Romans:



Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. ... Note this is same word used to describe the transformation of Jesus on the mountain ...

Paul goes on ... Then you will be able to approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will. (Romans 12:2) ... even God's will that God's Son must suffer and die

Finally, this passage places Jesus, Moses and Elijah on centre stage with God's voice speaking the key words, but the audience is clearly Peter, James and John and then through their later witness to people like us.



Which raises some awkward questions.

Do we really want to hear God's message to us and to experience God's presence with us?

Hopefully the answer is yes! But if and when it happens, it can be both frightening and confusing.

If we were to be blessed by such a transforming moment, would we want to freeze the moment in time and build permanent monuments like Peter, rather than following where Jesus leads us, potentially down a path of suffering, or dying and rising again?

For those of us at Croydon this is an important point as we contemplate changes to our building ... Just this week the Church Council met to discuss the building plans. A key question before us all is whether we want to preserve a monument to the past or freeze this moment in time or embrace an uncertain future with Jesus?

One final thought. I love mountains and I love climbing mountains and the thrill and vista that you get at the top of a mountain.

But mountains are exposed and sometimes dangerous places.

You can't stay there on the top.

You have to come down again.

You have to go home and resume normal everyday life away from the mountain top.

What lesson or vision or transforming experience can you take back down the mountain with you that will influence your ongoing life?
