

Sermon – 3 April 2022

The significance of some events in our lives is not appreciated until sometime later. My decision to join Michael and Kimberley on their tour of Israel was initially just a visit to the Holy Land, but that decision turned out far more significant in my life (and in Sharon's) than either of us would have realized. For those who don't know, Sharon and I met on the visit to Israel and the rest is, well, history.

The significance of this remarkable event known as the Transfiguration could not be realized until after the resurrection of Jesus. The three disciples, who witnessed this moment, were told not to tell anyone about until Jesus was raised from the dead. Why? The event itself is remarkable and memorable. Why keep quiet about until Jesus is raised from the dead?

In the Eastern Church, the Feast of the Transfiguration is one of the major Christian feasts while in the West, particularly in the Protestant west, it is all but forgotten as a Feast.

In the west, the Feast of the Epiphany is about the visit of the Magi while in the east the Feast of the Epiphany recalls the Baptism of Jesus and the identification of Jesus as the Son of God through the voice of God saying, "This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased." This is known as the great epiphany. The Feast of the Transfiguration, in which God speaks the same words is known as the small epiphany. These are the two occasions in which God declares publicly who Jesus is. This surely must be of great significance.

This event is recorded in the first three Gospels and we are looking at Matthew's account. All 3 synoptic Gospels place the Transfiguration a few days after Jesus tells his disciples, "there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God."¹

We'll come back to that.

Jesus takes only 3 of his disciples with him up a high mountain. Matthew and Mark emphasize this choice of these 3. They are by themselves – there is no one else. Why these 3? We see them again when Jesus asks them to accompany him to the garden of Gethsemane where he pleads with God not go through with what is about to happen. As we read through the Acts of the Apostles, we realize that these three play an important part in the leadership of the church.

Which mountain is being referred to? Sorry to disappoint some of you but it was probably not Mt Tabor, the traditional site of the Transfiguration. We now know that the top of that mountain was occupied at the time of Jesus. Mt Hermon has been suggested, but the fact remains that none of the Gospels identify which mountain is involved. That this event occurs on a mountain is reminiscent of Moses going up Mt Sinai to receive the Law.

On the mountain Jesus's appearance is altered.

¹ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Lk 9:27). (2016). Crossway Bibles.

he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light.²

When Paul encounters the risen Jesus on his way to Damascus, we read,

¹³ At midday, O king, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, that shone around me and those who journeyed with me. ¹⁴ And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' ¹⁵ And I said, 'Who are you, Lord?' And the Lord said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.'³

Here, the risen Jesus appears as a blinding light, brighter than the sun.

Then there appear with Jesus two of the great men of the OT. Moses who received the Law, and Elijah who was regarded as the greatest of the prophets.

How is it that Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus? Aren't they dead? Isn't talking with the dead prohibited by the Law?

All three, which includes Jesus, played significant parts in God's plans. Moses with the Law, Elijah with the prophetic foretelling of the Messiah, and Jesus with the fulfilment of both the Law and the prophets. All had a somewhat strange departure. Where was the body of Moses –

⁹ But when the archangel Michael, contending with the devil, was disputing about the body of Moses, he did not presume to pronounce a blasphemous judgment, but said, "The Lord rebuke you."⁴

Did Moses die, or was he, like Elijah, taken up?

Is this at all important?

Perhaps no. But what is important is that this is a physical appearance of all three, Jesus, Moses and Elijah. They are not being portrayed as spirits but as those who appear in the same form as Jesus. Luke tells us that they, that is Moses and Elijah, appear in glory.

So what form were they in?

They are talking with Jesus. Luke tells us that the content of the conversation was about what was to be accomplished in Jerusalem – Jesus' death and resurrection.

² [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Mt 17:2). (2016). Crossway Bibles.

³ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Ac 26:13–15). (2016). Crossway Bibles.

⁴ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Jud 9). (2016). Crossway Bibles.

Their role here mirrors and perhaps in part undergirds their significance in the leadership of the early church. As ‘the sons of Zebedee’, James and John play a further role in 20:20–28.⁵ {Gethsemane}

Whereas in the Gethsemane account the narrative interest is primarily in the experience of Jesus and secondarily in the failure of the disciple band to satisfactorily engage with this experience, here there is no narrative interest in what Jesus experiences (contrast Lk. 9:29–31), and everything is focused on what the chosen disciples are privileged to witness.⁶

Moses and Elijah are not disembodied spirits. Here, at the transfiguration, they are alive.

When the Sadducees try to trap Jesus with a question about marriage and the resurrection, Jesus responds

²⁹ “You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God. ³⁰ For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. ³¹ And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God: ³² ‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not God of the dead, but of the living.”⁷

How does Jesus connect the resurrection and the assertion that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are alive. Jesus is taking a future event, the resurrection of the dead, and applying it to the present. It is a bit like knowing that if we were to inherit a lot of money in the near future will impact our current expenditure, almost as though we already had the money in our hands. Our Jesus could be saying that , because of the resurrection of these patriarchs in the future, they must in some sense be alive now so that they can participate in that event.

So the transfiguration is a resurrection appearance, but one out of time. Hence the disciples are not to tell others of this event until Jesus is risen from the dead.

All three Gospels record this event being preceded by the statement of Jesus,

²⁷ “For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. ²⁸ Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”⁸

⁵ Nolland, J. (2005). [The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text](#) (p. 699). W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

⁶ Nolland, J. (2005). [The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text](#) (p. 699). W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

⁷ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Mt 22:29–32). (2016). Crossway Bibles.

⁸ [The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version](#) (Mt 16:27–28). (1989). Thomas Nelson Publishers.

This verse used to puzzle me. Clearly Jesus is referring to his coming in glory, what we call “his return” and what the NT refers to as his “Parousia”. Clearly everyone listening to Jesus at that time has died and Jesus has not returned.

The connection made by all three Gospels between what Jesus foretold and the event known as the transfiguration shows that Jesus was telling them about this event, some would see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom. So here is an interpretation of the event. It is a present participation in coming event, the return of Jesus in glory to judge the world. Here the angels (or messengers) are Moses and Elijah. This event is a precursor of the future coming and these disciples are privileged to experience it in the present.

Then the bright cloud covers them and a voice from the cloud says, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased, listen to him.” The disciples are greatly terrified. Being in the presence of God who is holy is a frightening experience. It is Jesus consoles the disciples with a touch and when they look up they see only Jesus. The event has passed. The voice has made it clear that Jesus supersedes Moses and Elijah, he is the fulfillment of their ministries.

All this is interesting, but what is its significance. We need to turn to 2 Peter to find out.

Christ’s Glory and the Prophetic Word

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. ¹⁹ And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, ²⁰ knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. ²¹ For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. ⁹

It appears that in the church there were those who not only denied the return of Christ (the Parousia) but ridiculed it. They described it as “cleverly devised myths”, presumably told to encourage the moral behaviour of believers. Jesus is coming to judge so look to your morals.

Peter cites his participation in the transfiguration, a physical event of which he was an eyewitness, as evidence that the return of Jesus is no made-up story, but a fact that has to be believed. The transfiguration was a preview, a demo version, of a future reality.

⁹ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (2 Pe 1:16–21). (2016). Crossway Bibles.

He says that in this event “we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed. The prophetic word in this instance are the references in the OT to that coming king. Ps 2 would be such a word that Peter had in mind.

2 Why do the nations rage
and the peoples plot in vain?

² The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers take counsel together,
against the Lord and against his Anointed, saying,

³ “Let us burst their bonds apart
and cast away their cords from us.”

⁴ He who sits in the heavens laughs;
the Lord holds them in derision.

⁵ Then he will speak to them in his wrath,
and terrify them in his fury, saying,

⁶ “As for me, I have set my King
on Zion, my holy hill.”

⁷ I will tell of the decree:
The Lord said to me, “You are my Son;
today I have begotten you.

⁸ Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,
and the ends of the earth your possession.

⁹ You shall break them with a rod of iron
and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.” ¹⁰

Here the declaration of the Son of God and his role in judgement is prophesied. A prophecy to be fulfilled at Christ’s return. The readers of Peter’s letter are to pay attention to these passages until the events prophesied take place – “*the day dawns and the morning star rises in our hearts.*” Furthermore, it is the interpretation that the apostles give to these prophetic words that is definitive, “*no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation.*” So however the opponents of the apostles may interpret these Scriptures, it is the apostles, because of their physical participation in the ministry of Jesus, who know the truth that God is conveying through his written word.

*The prophetic word of Scripture is made more sure by the transfiguration, for the transfiguration confirms the proper interpretation of Old Testament Scripture, that is, that there is a future coming of Christ for judgment and salvation.*¹¹

¹⁰ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Ps 2:1–9). (2016). Crossway Bibles.

¹¹ Schreiner, T. R. (2003). [1, 2 Peter, Jude](#) (Vol. 37, p. 319). Broadman & Holman Publishers.

So what do we learn from the Transfiguration?

1. The return of Christ is not just a wishful thought, but a future event whose certainty is assured by the Transfiguration. Moses and Elijah appear in resurrected form, but they are part of a future reality.
2. Jesus is the Son of God who will return to judge the world. In anticipation of which we need to live lives that display the qualities required of a follower.
3. It is the apostolic witness that confirms the truth of Christian belief and not our subjective feelings or intuition. (cf. 1 John 1)
4. It is the apostolic interpretation of Scripture that conveys God's truth.