

The Transfiguration of Jesus – Implications for Modern Christians

“After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them.” (Read the full accounts in Matthew 17:1-9 and Luke 9:18-37.)

The single most important question that faces every man and woman, in every generation is: who exactly was, or is Jesus Christ? How does His life, so long ago, in another culture, located in an obscure corner of the Roman Empire impact my daily life in the 21st century? It is a matter of record that Jesus came and lived in the world and did some amazing things. But, so what?

The answers you and I give to these questions will determine the kind of people we become, how we live, how we interpret what is going on around us, how we deal with personal challenges, and how we prepare for eternity.

The Background

One day, the disciples of Jesus were confronted by the ultimate answer to that question, and it shook them to the core. Something remarkable happened, that stretched their thinking beyond anything they had heard, or expected, from the religious leaders and teachers. This Jesus was not just a prophet, a teacher of arcane traditions, a purveyor of catchy sayings and parables. By the time they had finished, their lives were changed for ever. They had new power, new confidence to face the future, a brand new way of looking at life.

Consider the Circumstances. Our Lord had been ministering up and down the countryside for nearly three years. Now he was in the final stages, on his way to Jerusalem, where his ministry would reach its climax. A core group of disciples had followed him for the duration, but others had come and gone, as their interest waxed and waned and as Jesus' early popularity morphed into hostility. Those who had stuck with him had seen incredible miracles. They had participated in, probably, hundreds of miracles. They had witnessed dead people being brought back to life. They had watched as a few scant loaves and fish fed thousands, on at least two occasions. They had seen Jesus control the forces of nature. They had been there when powerful demons had been cast out of their hosts, in power encounters that shook the theological thinkers of the day. They had participated in all the awesome experiences described in the Gospels. They had weighed up the views of supporters and opponents. This core group slowly came to the realisation that Jesus Christ was the promised Messiah (the “Anointed” One), the Son of God.

Now everything was about to be changed. Against the background of power encounters and mass meetings, Jesus pricked their balloon. It was not enough, He declared, to follow Him when all went well. The true mark of discipleship was to follow him to execution, to the cross. Having mentored them for several years, now He was explaining that, unless they were prepared to die, they could never be His disciples. The standard He held up was one of pain, suffering, misunderstanding, rejection and isolation, even shame. The question was: would the disciples follow him to that extent? Would they remain firm? Would they carry on His mission, or

would they run away like so many others had done? It is easy to believe, to be positive, when everything is going well, when everyone is singing, praising God, in unison, in furious agreement, but how would they react when facing opposition, threats and death?

Re-Living the Event

This was the context in which Jesus took His inner circle, Peter, James and John, to the top of a mountain to pray. Away from the curious, the onlookers, the enthusiastic “rent a crowds”, those who followed Him for what they thought they could get out of Him. Just the four of them.

Many Christians discover that it is harder to pray than to watch miracles. And so, when the disciples started to pray with Jesus, they promptly dropped off to sleep.

While they were sleeping an amazing thing happened. Whatever caused them to open their eyes is not recorded for us, but the Bible tells us that when they came to they saw that Jesus was transformed. He was “transfigured” (μεταμορφόω, or changed into another form) before them. Something miraculous had happened to his body, his clothes. His face, we are told, shone brighter than the sun. This was a Jesus they did not know, one whom they had never seen. Only John, many years later, would have a vision of Jesus that came close to what they were now experiencing (read the first chapter of Revelation). The awesome thing was that Moses and Elijah, not ghosts, spirits or allegories, but the men themselves, were also there, talking with Jesus about his coming suffering.

When Peter came to he was gobsmacked. He simply did not know what to say. So, he voiced the first thing that came to his head: “Jesus, this is fabulous; let’s make three tents, one for you, one for Moses, one for Elijah. Let’s institutionalise all this. Let’s tell the world and bring them here. Then everyone will believe. Our hardened, cynical enemies will be convinced”. The problem was that Peter did not know what to say. He missed the point: God does not live in buildings; He cannot be contained or constrained by tents, boxes or forms. You cannot put Him in a box, label it and say “God lives here”. But that is what religion has done for thousands of years, trying to limit God and put him in a frame. God’s supposed address has all too often coincided with that of the local synagogue, church or mosque.

At this point it was clear that God had to intervene. The Scripture tells us that a cloud came down and overshadowed the entire party. The lights went out. Sometimes God has to intervene to get our attention, to shut us up, to teach us something new. “And when the cloud lifted they saw only Jesus” and heard the clarion call, “This is my Son – listen to Him”. Don’t get hung up on other peoples’ ideas, or traditions. It is time to change, to “get with the program”, to shake off the rust of the past and be renewed. “Follow My Son. Listen to Him.” Open your ears and hear what He has to say to you, today.

A Major Turning Point

This day was a turning point in the lives of Peter, James and John. Soon enough, they would return to the humdrum of their daily lives. They would go down from the

mountain and find the crowds gathered waiting for Jesus to return and perform more miracles. Back to the noise, disease, hunger, occupying soldiers and cyclical religionists. But something burned in their hearts, in their memories, that gave them strength and assurance for every tough time they would face moving into the future. Years later, when persecution had arisen, when schismatics tried to break up the church, when the empire struck back against the church, when the arenas were opened to host their suffering at the hands of cruel enemies, when it was dangerous to be a Christian, they remembered what they seen on the mountain, and it gave them strength.

Listen to Peter, addressing a Christian community undergoing intense persecution:

“For we did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. He received honour and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.’ We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.” (2 Peter 1:16-19)

What Peter is saying is, “We were eyewitnesses. We did not make up a fancy tale, a story to trick the world. We were there! No one, no amount of denials or suffering, can ever rob us of that amazing experience.”

The Apostle John also experienced suffering, beatings and imprisonment. But what he remembered was:

“We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14)

What made a difference was not great theology, emotional singing, rapturous praise, explosive meetings full of positive people, not even the miracles they had witnessed, but that they had witnessed the power of God, they had personally heard His voice, they had felt His presence. During times of opposition, death and deprivation, when it seemed they had nothing left over, they were able to stand firm, believing passionately that Jesus Christ was the Son of Almighty God, that they had seen the light of His glory, they had partaken of a very real experience that nothing, no one, could ever take away from them. What others said was not important. What was important was their relationship with Him.

Implications for Our Lives

This is an interesting story... but what does it mean today? Superficially, most of us have little in common with the first disciples.

The answer is two-fold, first on a theological level, and then on a practical level.

In terms of theology, the transfiguration teaches us that Jesus was no ordinary man; He was the Son of God, who took on a human body and lived among us, but never ceased to be God. He was the Creator, the Eternal. But He left the glory He shared with the Father, and the worship of the host of angelic beings, and came into our

space, our world, to identify with us and pay the ultimate price to bring us back to God. Jesus came to reconcile us, so that could live as God's children. There was no greater love than when Jesus came into the world. His life was no sideshow. His death at Calvary was no accident. Here was the "light of the world". This fact has given hope and community to Christians in every age.

"That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ." (1 John 1:1-3)

Look at His face and see God's glory reflected. "For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." (2 Corinthians 4:6)

But then the light was extinguished – for a brief period. His enemies conspired to destroy Him and those who followed Him. Ironically, his death was the centrepiece of God's plan to reach out to us and bring us into His family, so that we could live in His presence without fear. This same Jesus, who was stripped, beaten, spat on and nailed to a cross, was the Son of God, the Saviour of the world. What amazing love, that He could put aside His glory and die for us. The same power that the disciples witnessed was able to raise Him from the dead; so that we can receive power to live in His presence for eternity.

Second, the transfiguration reminds us that when Moses, Elijah and everyone else has gone, when the meeting is over, the evangelist or pastor has moved on, the visiting preacher has stepped down and we go back to our homes, He is still there. He is never *not* there. We can have total confidence in Him and in the power and truth of our relationship with Him. Even we leave the mountain top and go back into the world, where people who have not known His power live the way they always have and seek to influence us to be just like them, we can overcome the downward drag and live by His standard, in His power, because we have experienced something higher, the presence, majesty and power of Almighty God touching our lives. Christians don't have to live in the moment, always yielding to sin and the pressures of others, because they have seen Him and know He is greater than all.

Third, the story shows us that we need to take stock of the way we react to events. We need to stop talking and reacting the way we always do, giving our opinions, trying to appear learned and authoritative and assuming we always know best. There are times when God wants us to shut up and listen to what He has to say. Too many Christians find it hard to hear God because they don't stop talking. David said, "I will hear what the Lord will say to me" (Psalm 85:8). It is hard to listen when we are absorbed by other issues. But God continues to speak. He is speaking today. Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice" (John 10:27). Sit up and listen, "Today if you will hear His voice" (Hebrews 3:7).

Fourth, it is important not to spend too much time looking at others and living by what they say, even if they are Moses and Elijah. What they have is often not applicable. Let me explain. Both were influential in their times. Moses was the national hero, the great Liberator, the nation builder, who led Israel from slavery to freedom and gave them God's laws. Elijah was the nation's greatest prophet, who challenged kings and false religions in his generation. For the most part he was fearless. Both men spoke to their times with authority. Moses spent time in the presence of God and when he returned to the people his face shone with the glory of God. Elijah performed miracles and brought powerful messages from Jehovah. God raises up men and women, in His time, to achieve great things in times of crisis. But they are only people. There came a day when Moses breathed his last and was buried, an old man. Elijah pleased God so much that he was taken up to heaven in a chariot, and those who had lived with him were left alone, on earth. God is calling us to listen to Him. The Bible reminds us that He will not share His glory with anyone (Isaiah 42:8). He is calling us to listen to His Son. Stop where you are, open your heart and ears; the Holy Spirit will make everything clear to you.

Fifth, the transfiguration and its sequel remind us that, no matter how many blessings and great experiences we enjoy, we cannot live in the past. When Moses and Elijah are gone we are left with Jesus. Memorable experiences can encourage you, and give you confidence, but you simply cannot go back there. What's past is past. Too many Christians and denominations try to re-construct the past and live in its shadow, but there is no growth in an empty shell. The disciples were left alone with Jesus. What counted was not the experience, but the person. Many great works of God become frozen or lost because they are formalised. "Let's make three tents". Let's build a newer church, a newer liturgy, a newer governance structure, a newer worship pattern, a newer movement. It is easy to confuse the anointing of God, the blessing of God, of the moment, with His long-term purpose for our lives. He wants to lead us on, to continue to teach us, to experience His presence for today, not the residue of yesterday or yesteryear. How is the Holy Spirit leading you today? What is He teaching you? Take time out to get the answer for yourself.

Sixth, the account of the transfiguration is forward looking. It reminds us that we, too, can (will) be transformed.

"And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." (2 Corinthians 3:18, cf Romans 12:2).

We can be set free from the power of sin and Satan and made new people. You may not always feel it, or understand it, but change occurs. It is the work of the Spirit, it is supernatural. We are changed by the Spirit, living and working in us.

Seventh, the transfiguration account takes us beyond the moment. It reminds us that there are "seasons" in our relationship with God. There are periods of great blessing and emotional richness, times of great intimacy, when the presence of God feels tangible and we sense that we are on a mountaintop. However, for the most part, our lives are "hum drum". Most of our days are spent in the school room, the factory, the office, at the kitchen sink, stuck in traffic, in the mundanity of our daily relationships and responsibilities. Just as the disciples followed Jesus down from

the mountain to the needy crowds, so we are called to follow Him as we go out into our world, where we encounter demands, hassles, noise, deadlines and bills, where we have to put the rubbish bin out, wash the dishes, do the homework, hang out clothes and commute to the office. There is nothing transcendent about traffic or a buzzing intercom. But wait, He is there too. He is on the mountain and in the valley. He has promised to be with you. Spend time with Him, allow Him to speak to you, to teach, correct and encourage you. If He calls you to prayer, try not to go to sleep, because you will find in His continual presence the power and capacity you need to live a dynamic Christian life.

Making Sense

What is your relationship with Jesus Christ? Not your opinions, your ideology, or your past experiences (though they may be important), but your relationship now, today? Are you listening to people? Are you hoping for a Moses or Elijah to give you a spiritual high? Are you focussed on circumstances? Are you allowing God to speak, or are you too busy? Is He real to you, or do you depend on the experiences and buoyancy of others to keep you going? These are serious challenges. Are you too caught up in the valley to spend time with the Lord on the mountain? When was the last time you heard the voice of God and knew it was Him? God is calling each of us to “listen” to Him. To close our mouths and open our ears (as my wife and I used to remind our children when they were younger, “God gave you one mouth and two ears, so listen twice as much as you speak”).

When problems, temptations, pressures or people come and threaten to smother you, you can depend on Him. What you have experienced as a Christian is not a fable, not a figment of your imagination. He is real – you can entrust your life to Him.

God loves you. He does not stop thinking about you. He is still speaking. He is able to meet you where you are. He has a plan and purpose for your life.