

# A Matter of Death and Life

## Matthew 17:1-9

I was brought up the right way . . . manners are important . . . respect others . . . speak only when spoken to. So, as children, we sat listening to the adults talk . . . and when our patience ran out . . . when we wanted to go and play, we'd wait like a cat on a hot tin roof . . . itching and twitching and eventually, when we could bear it no longer . . . tugging at mum's skirt, or dad's trousers to get their attention . . . because we didn't dare interrupt while someone was speaking! The only occasion when it was okay to butt in was if it was a matter of utmost urgency . . . a matter of life or death.

So, as I hear this story of Jesus up the mountain with Peter, James and John, I can only conclude that either the same rules of manners don't apply to God, or that the situation on the mountain that day was a matter of life or death!

You see, Peter had the floor . . . as was his want! . . . Peter was speaking, and right in the middle of his sentence, God interrupts! Just cuts in . . . without a 'beg-your-pardon', or 'excuse me' to be heard. Talk about rude! Unless . . . unless this was a matter of life and death.

Well, there's no doubt that what's happening is a pivotal moment . . . a transformative moment . . . the ultimate mountain top experience. I mean, I'm sure it's not every day you get to meet Moses and Elijah! Jesus, as well, transfigured before them . . . transformed into this radiant, dazzling white apparition. It's out-of-this-world . . . it's awe-inspiring . . . and, sometimes you just have to know when to shut up!

But, Peter speaks! Of course Peter speaks! It's like he thinks he's got it . . . it all makes sense now . . . Moses, the greatest lawgiver . . . Elijah . . . the prophet par excellence . . . and Jesus . . . radiant white . . . well, isn't it obvious . . . he's the new law-giver . . . even greater than the greatest! . . . he's the new prophet, greater than even Elijah . . . and, together . . . what a team! Peter's got it worked out!

So, God has to interrupt . . . to cut in . . . without a 'beg-your-pardon' or 'excuse me' . . . because this is a matter of life and death . . . or, to be precise . . . a matter of death and life . . . a pivotal moment . . . a transformative moment . . . for Peter . . . for all followers of Jesus . . . if only he would shut up for a moment!

It was his eyes that did it . . . it's so often the eyes . . . they distract us . . . and, seduce us. Who could blame him with what he saw before him? A transfigured Jesus . . . Moses and Elijah . . . it's a picture of glory . . . of power . . . of excellence . . . of perfection . . . that's what his eyes told him . . . this is what Jesus is about . . . this is who Jesus is. And, still today, our eyes seduce us. Advertisers know it too well . . . that's why the packaging changes on your peanut butter every couple of years . . . so our eyes seduce us into thinking there's something better . . . something greater . . . brighter and bolder . . . here is the good life . . . here is the future . . . and you can post pictures of it on social media so your friends can see and have the good life too! At least, that's what our eyes tell us. But, all that our eyes see will one day be just dust again . . . it all ends in death . . . no matter how clever the advertising . . . no matter how good the product . . . no matter how convincing the prophet.

And, even when it comes to the church our eyes seduce us, or deject us, as we celebrate, or lament, the health . . . the vitality . . . the glory of the church by what we see. A full church is a powerful church . . . an empty church is a dead church . . . and we're tempted to think what is needed is a new Moses . . . make sure we've got the teaching right . . . give a bit of guidance . . . then we'll have the good life again. Or, what we need is a prophet . . . shake things up around here . . . get people back on track . . . return the church to its glory days . . . with Jesus . . . in glory on the mountain! Because that's what Jesus is about.

When our eyes seduce us it becomes a matter of life and death . . . for us . . . for the church.

And, God has to interrupt . . . otherwise there's no life . . . there's just death.

"This is my Son . . . my Son . . . the Beloved"!

Jesus is not a new lawgiver . . . he didn't come to out-Moses Moses . . . he didn't come to tell us what to do . . . he didn't come to give us a bunch of commands to get our lives in order. He is God's Son . . . the gracious presence of God amongst us.

And, Jesus is not a new prophet either . . . pointing out to us where we've gone wrong . . . telling us to pull our socks up . . . telling us we should be grateful for what God has done for us. No, Jesus is God's Son, the life of God amongst us.

"This is my Son . . . listen to him." "Shut up, Peter . . . listen to him! It's a matter of death and then life." Dying to Moses . . . dying to the prophets . . . dying to self . . . so there's only Jesus left.

Listen to him . . . to Jesus . . . that's where the good life is . . . life even beyond death.

As the disciples lay there, overcome by fear, Jesus comes near to them and touches them . . . and opens their ears with a word of comfort . . . a word of grace . . . a word of hope. He opens their ears with what must be the most concise expression of the gospel possible: "Do not be afraid".

"Do not be afraid." What beautiful words! Aren't they words for us . . . for our church . . . today? Don't we so much need to hear those words? "Do not be afraid". Our world is so full of fear. Fear of dying . . . fear of failing . . . fear of getting it wrong . . . fear of connecting . . . fear of committing. And, in our fear we don't listen . . . we won't listen . . . to each other . . . to God . . . because all we hear is Moses or Elijah! And, in our fear we won't reach out and touch those who so desperately need to have touch . . . and, if we *do* reach out, it is to touch them with the words of Moses or Elijah . . . because that's what we know . . . words that demand and command . . . and restrict on control . . . so, that's what we speak . . . to LGBTQI+ people . . . to refugees . . . to people with mental health issues . . . to those on the political right . . . to those on the political left . . . to anyone who is 'different'!

So, this is a matter of life and death . . . for them . . . for us too . . . to hear not those words, but the words of God's beloved Son . . . words that comfort and heal. So, Jesus comes again to us . . . again and again . . . on this holy day . . . like he did on the mountain . . . he comes and touches us with his presence . . . he gives us himself .

. . his body . . . his blood . . . his life! . . . to open our ears . . . so that even in death . . . the death that surrounds us . . . even in death there is life . . . life we can share with others.

“Do not be afraid”. Listen to him . . . listen to him . . . the beloved Son. It is a matter of life and death . . . and life. Amen.

Oh, by the way . . . did you catch what Jesus said to his disciples when they came down the mountain . . . did you hear it? “Tell no one about the vision . . . about what you saw . . . *until* the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.” Well, it’s happened . . . he is risen . . . so, you can tell them now . . . tell them about the Son . . . tell them as much as you want. Don’t be afraid.

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