

Sermon: Transfiguration Sunday-19th February 2023
Theme: Transforming Glory
Text: Matthew 17:1-9

17 After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. **2** There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. **3** Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.

4 Peter said to Jesus, ‘Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters – one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.’

5 While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!’

6 When the disciples heard this, they fell face down to the ground, terrified. **7** But Jesus came and touched them. ‘Get up,’ he said. ‘Don’t be afraid.’ **8** When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.

9 As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, ‘Don’t tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.’

The year was 1977. The place was a cinema in Rundle Mall. The film was Star Wars. It was my first experience of a science fiction movie. The special effects were amazing, especially where the X-wing rebel fighters were flying through the canyons of the Death Star. I know it wasn’t a patch on CGI, but to a certain eleven-year-old, it was the best thing I’d ever seen.

I thought it couldn’t get any better than that, but two years later came another movie, The Empire Strikes Back, and then a third, each building in the other, until we had prequels rather than sequels. Each film told the story in part, but none of them stood on their own. I wonder if we’ve seen the last of this franchise.

Today churches all over the world celebrate an event in Jesus’ life called the Transfiguration. Another word we could use for what happened is metamorphosis, or transformation. Jesus takes three of his disciples, the executive team of Peter, James and John, up a mountain. There **“His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light.”** What happened appeared to be completely out of character for Jesus. But like the Star Wars’ movies, it only makes sense when the sequel of Jesus’ cross and resurrection is released.



Jesus' disciples have heavy hearts as they trudge up the mountain that day. He had just dropped a bombshell. **"Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life."** Surely this was off script. Peter certainly thought so. He began to argue with Jesus, but Jesus quickly put him back in his box. And what is more, Jesus spells out what following him would mean for his disciples. **"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."**

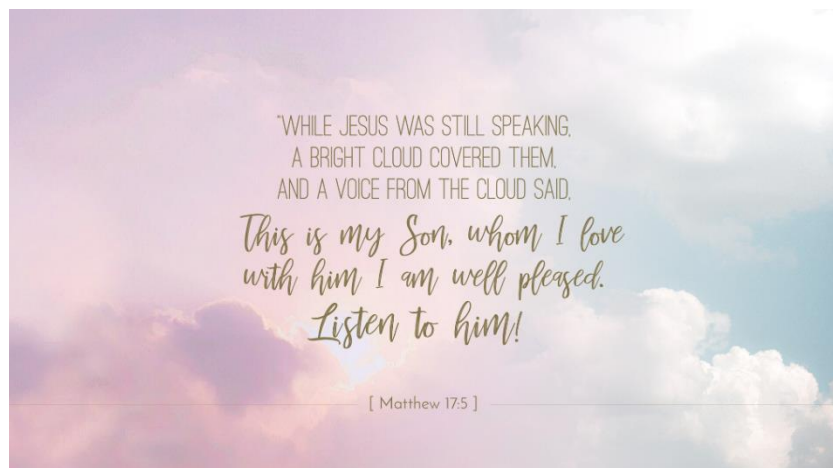
That's a hard road indeed. So here they are, preoccupied, burdened, confused, and all of a sudden, shocked too. Jesus changed in front of their eyes. His face was shining like Moses' face after he had met with God on Mount Sinai. And it wasn't just Jesus' face that shone, but his clothes too. Little did they know that this was a prequel to the incredible events of that first Easter morning. An angel greets the two Marys as they arrive at the unexpectedly empty tomb. **"His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men."**

Then, to add to the disciples' shock, **"there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus."** These were two of the greatest characters of the Old Testament. Moses was the great lawgiver and prophet, and Elijah was seen as the greatest prophet. What were they talking with Jesus about? And where did Jesus fit in?

Peter tries to make sense of the situation. He starts speaking to Jesus too, calling him Lord, and telling him that he'd like to make three booths, or tabernacles, to mark what he has just seen. Perhaps in time people would come and visit this shrine and remember the incredible things that happened there. But this is only the prequel. In time to come, Jesus will outshine Moses, and Elijah, and everyone else.

We've had the lights. Now comes the darkness, and we hear the voice of God. **"While Peter was still speaking to Jesus, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"** in the previous chapter, Peter was right to say that Jesus was the Messiah. But he, and other disciples needed their minds expanded and their vision corrected.

Today was the start, but they'd only fully understand when it got to the Holy Week sequel. Right now, though, the disciples are terrified. The light, the cloud, the voice. The voice and the cloud told them that they were standing in the presence of God. In Jesus.



“They fell facedown to the ground, terrified. But Jesus came and touched them. “Get up,” he said. “Don’t be afraid.” This is the way Jesus dealt always acted. Remember how he touched those who were deemed untouchable, the sick, mentally ill, those crushed by an evil spirit. Not only did Jesus reach out his hand of compassion; when Jesus did what he had promised and rose from the dead, he invited his disciples, especially Thomas, to reach out and touch him, to confirm that he was real. Really God, but really a human being too. This transfigured, glorious Jesus, still flesh and blood, human like them.

“Don’t be afraid.” They had also heard this reassuring word before. It’s what Jesus said when they saw him walking on the water as they were in a lonely little boat. **“Take courage. It is I. Don’t be afraid.”** That’s what happens in the sequel too. **“Don’t be afraid,”** the angel says to the two Marys **“for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here, he is risen, just as he said.”**

In response to Jesus’ comforting word and touch, Peter, James and John pluck up the courage to open their eyes. And what do they see? Only Jesus. No Moses, no Elijah, but the one who was greater than both of these eminent servants of God. Still somewhat dazed and confused, Peter, James and John follow Jesus down the mountain. Jesus gives no further explanation of what has happened. Instead, he tells them not to tell anyone what has happened, **“until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”**



The Transfiguration was an amazing experience. Later on his first letter, Peter reflects on what happened that day: **“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.”**”

But that wasn’t the end of the story. Jesus went back down the mountain, got his hands dirty again in ministry to the poor, the bereft, the lonely and desperate. Not high and mighty, but real and earthy. The story came to a head one Friday afternoon on a hillside outside of Jerusalem. Jesus was hanging on a cross, crucified on a trumped charge, dying not because of human injustice but because of the justice of God. **“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”**

Jesus’ friends, even most of the disciples who had walked the long journey to Jerusalem alongside him, had abandoned him. It looked that this was the end of the line. There wouldn’t be a sequel this time. What they didn’t understand was that the cross was the crowning glory of Jesus’ life, and that there was much more to come, starting with Sunday

morning. Jesus' resurrection wasn't even the end, but the beginning of the next phase of the story. God had much, much more in store for his people and his creation.

We live in the same world Jesus did. A world of need, anxiety, sickness, relationships in need of healing, yet at the same time a world of wonder and beauty. Jesus' transfiguration gave his disciples a glorious glimpse into his true identity. But if Jesus had stayed up there on that mountain, his glory alone wouldn't have done us any good. Instead, he took the low road, and showed the depth of his father's love, over and over again.



His life of love culminated in his death on the cross. And the script of his life took one, final dramatic turn. On Sunday morning, there was the same bright light as the Transfiguration. God was at work, Jesus was raised from the dead, and the story continues. We know that God is committed to one final production, where everything will be put to rights, and God will bring final healing to his creation, and to those who have placed their trust in him. That's the hope I need in a world that so easily drags us down.

As we wait for the final episode, God calls you and I to do what Peter, James and John did: follow Jesus, listen to him. He's the one who walks alongside us and will never abandon us. And look forward to in hope to the final instalment in the series, where God will rule over all creation in justice and peace. This is the sequel that brings the story to a glorious conclusion.

Peace in Christ

Pastor Andrew Brook