

## Last Sunday after Epiphany – Transfiguration Matthew 17:1-9

It is somewhat amazing how little we have in the Gospel accounts about the disciples of Jesus. Peter, John and James have quite a high profile but apart from Judas Iscariot the others are generally mentioned as “the disciples”. What is even more amazing is that the high profile 4 are often mentioned because of the wrong or rash things they do rather than because they are the shining examples of what it is to be a disciple of Jesus. Judas, as Jesus’ betrayer, has quite clearly got a bad press but Peter, James and John have their moments too.

Why then does Jesus pick these 3 to go up the mountain with him to pray? Peter, just a few days before, has a bit of an outburst when Jesus tells the disciples of his death to come and that is one of many of Peter’s outbursts detailed in the gospel stories. It seems that he was a rash, hot-headed, passionate man who jumped into everything feet first often only to find his feet have ended up firmly in his mouth.

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, are also not what one would necessarily call the perfect team players, they were the brothers looking to get a decent spot in heaven and they even went as far as having their mother ask Jesus outright for special treatment for her sons. So why these three at the transfiguration? Such a delicate, private, intimate moment between the Father and the Son with Moses and Elijah there it is hard to understand why such unpredictably passionate disciples would have been chosen to be witnesses of such an event.

It could be that Jesus simply went up to the mountain to pray and didn’t expect anything out of the ordinary to happen there. Perhaps his companions that day were by chance Peter, John and James and no planning went into the encounter at all. He certainly didn’t want anyone to get to hear about it afterwards until his death and resurrection. It may be that Jesus went to a quiet place to pray to get away from the endless demands on him to preach, teach and heal and took a random 3 men with him for company or protection in case he was found and disturbed.

However, it could be that these 3 men witnessed this event for a very good reason. Perhaps it was an opportune moment for God the father to confirm the divinity of God the son to the 3 disciples who found it most difficult to follow Jesus completely without their enthusiasm causing them to use their own initiative unwisely. Once again it was Peter who jumped in first, “let’s build 3 monuments so everyone knows that Moses, Elijah and Jesus (the Messiah) were here speaking to God and one another.” He says.

But of course this was not a public event; this was a private encounter between Jesus and his Father. Making claims about Jesus at this stage that attracted the attention of the Jewish authorities could have been disastrous for Jesus’ mission and the path God had prepared. God’s rebuke and his order that Peter, John and James listen to Jesus was for that event and for the rest of their time together.

The whole nature of the transfiguration was to draw history, prophecy and redemption together. It went beyond God claiming Jesus as his son, and brought in the history of the Jewish nation, its laws and prophecies all to acknowledge, support and prove that Jesus was the messiah. Moses, as the man to whom God entrusted the 10 commandments, represents the ancient Jewish laws.

Elijah is a representative of the prophets, someone who was there to help the Jewish nation through rough times in their history when they were being seduced by other nations and gods away from the God of Israel on a path that ultimately led to the exile of the Jewish land, and who it was believed would come back to earth as a forerunner for the messiah. Jesus, then, in this scenario is the messiah, the redeemer of the world, being confirmed as such by the representative of Jewish law, the representative of the Jewish prophets and by God himself who once again authenticates Jesus' ministry in a similar manner to his words at Jesus' baptism – "this is my son, my chosen".

It isn't clear who the intended beneficiary of the conversation between Jesus, Moses and Elijah was. That could have been for Jesus' benefit, a face-to-face pep talk with those who represented law and prophets which were being fulfilled by Jesus in his ministry and ultimately his death and resurrection. If Jesus was in any doubt this event would have reassured him that he was on the right path however difficult it might have seemed. Alternatively, that could have been for the benefit of the disciples, to confirm the confession of Peter that Jesus was the messiah that had occurred about a week earlier.

Whoever was or was not supposed to witness Moses and Elijah there is no doubt that the word of God as spoken through the cloud was firmly directed at the disciples. The 3 men with passionate enthusiasm and sometimes agendas of their own which did not entirely sit with Jesus' mission, were being told in no uncertain terms that Jesus had God's authority, was God's son and was divine in himself. Jesus was in control of the operation they were his followers and did not always hold as much information as he did.

Jesus made the decisions and they were to trust. This was going to become so much more important during Holy Week, when the disciples were confused, frightened and feeling under threat they did not retaliate or fight the authorities because Jesus told them not to. The transfiguration conferred on Jesus God's blessing and authority before some of Jesus most loyal but also most unpredictable disciples.

And just as the words spoken by God were for the disciple to remember beyond that one event, they are also words spoken to disciples throughout the ages. God says, "This is my Son, my chosen; Listen to him". Whichever account you read the words "listen to him" stand out. They are words spoken to us. If we believe that the gospels are eye-witness accounts of Jesus' life and ministry and that God was heard by 3 men saying this then these words are as important to us as they were to them.

Jesus continues to speak to us, through the scriptures, through our prayers, through encounters with others, in all sorts of ways – we are charged to listen to him. Listen to him

as we move into another Lent take the time to stop and think about what it is Jesus would say to you and whatever it is that Jesus is saying to you remember that he is God's son, the chosen one with whom God is well pleased, listen to him"