



# Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

# A summit gathering

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## Matthew 17:1-13

1 "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 facedown 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." 10 The disciples asked him, "Why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?" 11 Jesus replied, "To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. 12 But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands." 13 Then the disciples understood that he was talking to them about John the Baptist."

Just a week ago, here in Sydney, there was an important summit gathering of treasurers and financial experts from the G20 group of nations. You could be forgiven for having missed it—for, apart from a special Q&A and various newspaper articles, the event was all relatively low key. It was, however, a significant meeting and, as often is the case, the term 'summit' was used.

We also use that word when we talk about the top of a high mountain that is to be climbed. Among our gifts from family at Christmas was a set of DVDs which featured the hundred great moments captured on film. Two stand out in my mind—one is Scott's great trip to Antarctica, which of course became one of those 'nearly-but-not-quite' moments when he was beaten to the South Pole by Amundsen, the great Norwegian explorer. The other is the expedition led by Sir John Hunt, when the late Sir Edmund Hillary and Sherpa Tenzing were the first to successfully climb Everest.

When I talk about the summit gathering recorded for us in the gospels, it is both a gathering of people together and a climb. It is an appropriate focus just a week before Lent and our special theme throughout Lent: The Man who was also Lord! will in turn give way to our Holy Week/Easter Mission.

The period that follows Christmas in the Christian calendar is Epiphany which serves to reveal the glory of God as we see it in Jesus. In the transfiguration that glory reaches a climax (or perhaps what we might call an 'apex') as we are given an insight into God's nature, manifest in Jesus Christ.

It also helpfully serves as a bridge into the season of Lent, because it comes at a crucial juncture in the Lord's ministry. Let us remind ourselves of the biblical context.

Jesus has just announced that he is heading for Jerusalem and he has shared the fact that this is going to involve suffering. It comes after Peter has declared who Jesus is at Caesarea Philippi. This same Peter responds to the news that suffering lies ahead in Jerusalem by saying, “Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you!” (16:23)

As if to confirm his course, Jesus ascends a mountain to be with God the Father. It is on this mountain that the inner-circle of disciples, Peter, James and John, are both awed and frightened by what they see and hear.

In our lives we are called to reach for the summit, but (as with the disciples) it may well involve experiences and insights that we never could have planned for.

There are always dangers in seeking the summit of life; to reach for the very best that life offers—mountain climbing has so many risks attached to it.

When I was a minister in Wales I had contact with Sir Edmund Hillary and he told me how he used to climb the Snowdonia Range of mountains in preparation for his 1953 assault on Everest. From time to time during our time living in Wales, we would hear the news of those who had succumbed to the danger of mountain climbing and lost their lives.

In Patrick Meyer’s play K2 a marooned climber on the Himalayan peak that give the play its name voices a very interesting thought when he says, “Mountains are metaphors.” I find that most instructive when I turn to this passage, for if mountains are metaphors it can certainly be applied to testing, seeking and, most important of all, vision.

Jesus himself will scale the summit of all time as he goes to his cross—and the cost will be enormous.

Some parts of the world choose to call this Sunday “Transfiguration Sunday”. In doing so, it does at least encourage people to open up what is a very significant passage found in the gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke. We cannot view this passage without having the cross in mind—and what is to happen there. But in the cross we see the glory of God revealed for all the world to see.

At this summit gathering, the three disciples are given an insight that must have been of great magnitude, so much so that Jesus instructed them, “Don’t tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.” (v.9)

Let me look at what it might mean for us to see this moment as a summit, in terms of:

- What it meant for Jesus Christ
- What it meant for the disciples
- What it meant to return from the summit.

### **Seeking the summit for Jesus Christ—Meant a transcendent vision**

The Transfiguration is a unique in the gospels and appears to be the only occasion in Jesus’ earthly mission and ministry when there is a moment of glory in such a physical and tangible way. We invariably focus on the disciples, but fail to ask what this vision might have meant for Jesus Christ.

In the Lucan account, the words of Jesus indicate that the event was a demonstration (or illustration) of the promised kingdom of God. “Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God.” (Luke 9:27)

It must have been a powerful experience; some writers have suggested this is a resurrection experience written back into the gospels. I am not persuaded, but look at this incident in the ministry of Jesus and gain a great deal from asking myself what it actually did for Jesus himself. We must take care not to rush on to the impact upon the disciples, however interesting that is.

This event is firstly within the orbit of the experience of Jesus and it would most certainly appear to offer:

- some brief respite in the midst of his pressurised ministry
- renewed strength which always came in relation to the Father
- identification with those two massive characters of Jewish Law and Prophecy—Moses and Elijah.

We do well to remind ourselves that a ‘mountaintop’ does not just exist—it has to be climbed. Many find it instructive to think of Jesus ascending this summit as related to prayer and contemplation—and I think there is a rich vein of spiritual truth there.

As we begin to really grasp what lies ahead of Jesus, I find it reassuring to think that Jesus himself needed moments of this kind in order to face what lay ahead.

In this context, there is not only the visual transformation, but we hear the words which we also hear at the baptism of Jesus in response to the disciples’ misunderstanding: “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!” (v.5)

### **Seeking the summit for the Disciples—A transforming experience**

The inner-group of disciples already appear to be a unit in themselves. They would later accompany him in the Garden of Gethsemane (26:36-46).

In a recent trip to the cinema, we saw *The Railway Man* where Colin Firth and Nicole Kidman play outstanding roles. Eric Lomax, the lead character in this true story, needs to return to Thailand and to a camp where he had been held prisoner and tortured during the Second World War. One aspect of torture that he and others experienced was that of the deprivation of light.

When a person is taken away from light and deprived of its wondrous power, it comes as a great shock to have to face light again. Eyes can become accustomed to the dark and the futile resignation to thinking that darkness is all there is, which has a great deal to say to us as we think of our own lives.

The disciples would see in the presence of Jesus a glory that is so different from the apparent darkness of so much of their ordinary lives.

I am certain that this experience would have had an enormous and enduring impact upon these three disciples. This may well be part of the reason why we read in the Book of 2 Peter, “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 eye witnesses 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 1:16-18)

In this summit meeting, the disciples would link together what they had already heard Jesus say about the journey to Jerusalem—and suffering with this experience of glory.

- It would clearly help them to focus upon his departure from them.
- It continues the establishment of Peter as the leader of the disciples, made complete at Pentecost.
- It would draw out the weakness of the disciples who wanted a glory to hold onto and yet didn't want the suffering.

In his account, Luke draws our attention to the disciples falling asleep. We can be too tough on the disciples. John Storman uses the illustration of Rip Van Winkle. He fell asleep, you will recall in a quiet spot on the Hudson River. He did not wake up for 20 years.

When he went to sleep, the sign above his local tavern read, "George III, King of England" he was a subject of the British crown and yet when he woke, George Washington had replaced the king. We may miss things when asleep, both in reality and metaphorically.

While the disciples may well have been sleeping, they felt confident enough to sleep, such was the presence of Jesus among them ... it can be a statement of trust.

This moment was a vivid confirmation of the calling of Jesus Christ upon their lives, as well as a demonstration of the glory of his future kingdom.

Perhaps one of the lessons they would only learn later is that if there was to be suffering for Jesus, then something of the same lay ahead for them. Indeed this would become the motif of all true discipleship.

Peter was so pleased with the moment that he wanted to prolong it. Again we can sympathise with him, but it is an indication that it had not fully registered in his mind what taking up the cross might mean for him and his fellow disciples.

The course of the ministry of Jesus is confirmed by the appearance of Elijah, the greatest of the prophets, and Moses, the great law-giver. This would not be lost on the disciples and the sight of this is a foretaste of resurrection glory.

### **Returning from the summit—Down to earth with a bump**

As treasurers of nations left Sydney, hopefully they would take back some positive news or gains from the gathering. What did the disciples take from this meeting as they returned to the rest of those early followers?

It is here that I find the passage that follows to be of great interest. Jesus heals a demon-possessed boy and, in a way that is more explicit in Luke, the disciples had been unable to help. "I begged your disciples to drive it out, but they could not," (Luke 9:40) said a man in the crowd. The frustration of the disciples tells us a great deal—so much so that they came to him in private and asked the question, "Why couldn't we drive it out?" (17:19)

After a moment of glory, we are often brought down to earth with a bump! The Christian life is often 'a land of hills and valleys'. In the Old Testament we read, "But the land you are crossing the Jordan to take possession of is a land of mountains and valleys that drinks rain from heaven." (Deuteronomy 11:11)

In the space of one day, we can feel that we are on the mountain top and in the depths of a difficult experience. In the parallel account in Luke of Jesus healing the boy, following this mountain top experience, we read these strong words on the lips of Jesus, "You unbelieving and perverse generation, how long shall I stay with you and put up with you?" (Luke 9:41).

The words need to be understood within the context of disciples who appear to have been given authority and yet fail to really understand how they should carry out his mission.

In a day when playing any kind of game on Sunday was considered bad form, the little boy was in the garden playing ball. His deeply-religious Grandmother came out and enquired rather sternly as to what he was doing. He replied, “I’m playing ball with God! I throw it up in the air and he throws it back.” Yet, from this simple and naïve statement is a profound truth—that what goes up must come down:

- great religious experiences give sustenance to our lives
- practical living on earth gives shape to our witness.

For many modern readers, the account of the transfiguration of Jesus has to be one of the most challenging in the New Testament. The very nature of its ‘other worldliness’ leaves it hard to understand.

We are taken into the realms of mystery, but we must take out from this experience something of the impact that it had upon those early disciples. Clearly they could not comprehend what was before them and perhaps the deepest truth lies in those words heard from heaven in the midst of the experience, “Listen to him!” (v.5)

Douglas Hare sums it up when he says, “Seeing Jesus transfigured has value only if it leads the disciples to listen obediently to his divinely authorised teaching.”

It will only make sense after the resurrection, but we can take from it the fact that those who witness his heavenly glory must also witness his earthly agony.

One of the most used and yet I have to say often mis-used religious words today is ‘awesome’. This evening’s service on this particular theme is an appropriate time to use the word ‘awesome’! If we take this passage as a starting point, the glory of God is all around us—not only in the ‘otherness’ of light, but also in the harsh reality of suffering.

Leslie Weatherhead recalled the words of an epitaph in The Eternal Voice. It read, “Here lies the body of John Smith, who for forty years cobbled shoes in this village to the glory of God.”

Whatever you and I are called to do—let us reach out in response to Jesus and do it to his glory.