



# Just listen to Him

## Matthew 17:1-9

There is discussion around the world about the Christian calendar. This mainly centres upon fixing the date of Easter on a consistent Sunday every year. This will of course impact greatly the calendar that leads up to Easter and the period that flows from it. I suspect it will take some time to be able to reach decisions, perhaps even decades.

Having said this, there is a constant yearly challenge to transition from the season of Epiphany into the season of Lent. Today, we think about the Transfiguration of Jesus which can be meaningfully described as a bridge between Epiphany and Lent. In some traditions, the Transfiguration was often included in Lent itself. I prefer it to precede Lent.

In the gospel narrative, Jesus Christ has announced that he is going to Jerusalem where he will face suffering and even death (16:21-33) and this follows the confession of Peter at Caesarea Philippi (16:13-30). Two things become very apparent:- Peter, who will become the leader of the earliest Christian church, is beginning to understand who Jesus is, albeit he is still on a journey of discovery  
Jesus Christ is opening up something of who he is at the deepest level as he reveals his glory

We are given a clear indication that the course of his journey is set as he ascends a high mountain where he is clearly identified with God the Father.

There are not too many occasions when we are given time-linkages but “After six days” would suggest that whatever has gone before is obviously linked to what follows.

“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.” (v.v 1-2a)

We note that Jesus takes this inner group of disciples and ascends an unidentified mountain. There has been ongoing debate as to which mountain it was. Some of the earliest writers suggested that Mount Tabor, which was relatively close to Nazareth, was the mountain. But it would not really be considered a high mountain. Mount Hermon seems to be the favourite choice, strengthened by the fact that the disciples had been in the region of Caesarea Philippi.

We can establish a picture of this when we know that Mount Hermon was about three thousand metres above sea level.

It is therefore tall enough to describe as high

I have seen it and can report that it is often snow-capped throughout a good deal of the year

Mountains are highly significant throughout the Bible and Matthew’s Gospel concludes with the Great Commission and its link to Jesus being on a mountainside. We remind ourselves of some of the important links:-

The account in Genesis of Abraham and Isaac

The giving of the law through Moses

The building of the Temple



We have already seen the importance of a mountain in the Temptations (4:8) and of course the great Sermon on the Mount (Chapters 5 to 7).

On this mountainside Jesus is transfigured.

Text: Matthew 17:5 -

“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.’”

Jesus Christ shines with glory and is transfigured before them. It is little wonder that this small group of disciples are frightened at the sight they see and the experience they encounter. The ministry of Jesus is confirmed by the appearance of Elijah and Moses. Elijah is considered to be the greatest of all the prophets  
Moses gave shape to the people of God as the great law-giver

From the clouds on the mountainside, God speaks. Clouds invariably indicate what is to be. I don't think as human beings we have ever had such an interest in weather forecasts. They dominate a page of daily newspapers and have their own channel on TV. Many people's phones have an app to keep them aware of what is happening. The truth is that many sit through the sports news on TV so they can hear the weather forecast.

There are two significant aspects of mountains and clouds. We remind ourselves that in the Old Testament God led his people by fire and by cloud. In this situation, we reach the conclusion that this mountainside encounter reveals in a quite specific way the presence of God.

This experience is filled with mystery and points to the future. The voice from the cloud repeats Matthew 3:17 in the context of the baptism of Jesus. The earlier words identify the person of Jesus Christ and now the words place him clearly above Moses and Elijah.

The words “Listen to him” are so important. People paid attention to the prophets and certainly took notice of the law God had given through Moses. Here we are called to take notice of what Jesus Christ had to say. We explore this together by asking:-

### **What were they to listen for?**

We remind ourselves that the confession of Peter is very much focused on Jesus Christ as the Messiah (16:13) and Jesus instructs the disciples not to reveal this to anyone as yet and goes on to tell them that he will suffer and die.

There is no avoiding the fact that Peter and Jesus share powerful rebukes (16:22-23). Peter took Jesus aside, whereas Jesus turned and addressed Peter. It was certainly one of the most powerful moments with regard to Jesus and his relationship with the disciples.

Michael Green even goes as far as to suggest that the situation can be understood in terms of a battle. This makes sense when we understand the context of the early church where they had to learn that to follow Jesus Christ was going to mean suffering and hardship.

There are of course different ways of listening and here it is not just an audible voice that God instructs the disciples and us to listen for. In the context of hearing a voice in the



mystery of this experience they are encouraged to listen to Jesus Christ and that means his words, his example and so much more.

The account of the transfiguration continues Matthew's great theme of God's Sonship. For the disciples who are present, it is a sign of the new life that is perpetually offered in Jesus Christ. We can understand the event from two very distinct perspectives:-

We can understand it in relation to an affirmation of who Jesus Christ is – that is his nature and divine presence

We can understand it as also giving the disciples opportunity to see and hear God at work in a quite unique way in Jesus Christ – and his relationship with all that has gone before, as well as the mystery of God.

These disciples will have to face chaos that is soon to be upon them in relation to death, loss and fear. They must listen as never before for God's clear voice which reveals just who Jesus is. They must listen to what it says about his identity and his authority.

For those who find the writings of C S Lewis helpful, here is something that resonates with this passage. The writer pens a final word from Aslan in *The Silver Chair*: "Here on the mountain I have spoken to you clearly. I will not often do so down in Narnia. Here on the mountain, the air is clear and your mind is clear; as you drop down into Narnia, the air will thicken. Take great care that it does not confuse your mind. And the signs which you have learned here will not look at all as you expect them to look, when you meet them there. That is why it is so important to know them by heart and pay no attention to appearance. Remember the signs and believe the signs. Nothing else matters."

God prepares people in the transcendent encounters of life to endure the world below. The disciples are not being encouraged to believe that this amazing experience is to be their everyday experience, but it will make such a difference to their return.

### **What does it say to us?**

Matthew's purpose in this passage seems to be focused upon how the disciples handle the experience. Jesus is preparing them for the future and all that it will mean for them and it will inevitably ask questions of ourselves.

The voice of God from the cloud gives an identical public endorsement as was given at the Baptism of Jesus (3:17). We observe that the disciples "fell face down to the ground, terrified." (v.6) The effect of the Transfiguration upon the disciples was enormous. There is no doubt a degree of fear to be found. Mark relates fear to Peter's foolish words of wanting to retain the moment. But the fear we find here is a prelude to an important reality – and that is when they get up they see no-one "except Jesus" (v.8).

We are prone to use the term "mountaintop experiences" and I don't know any passage that more easily articulates a connecting experience as this one. In our lives these moments can be very important, but we cannot live with them for ever.

I think there is a powerful message in this account that reminds us that however attractive they may seem we cannot cling to our mountaintop experiences. When Peter asks if he can build shelters to encapsulate the moment, his impulse and desire is nothing but good. He wants to stay with the Lord Jesus and with the great heroes of his faith, but the challenge will always lie ahead.



A deepening faith should always lead us to a stronger sense of compassion. When Jesus and the three disciples were engaged in a mountaintop experience, the other disciples were down at base camp, seeking to deal with a difficult situation, full of heartache for a loving father and his woefully ill son.

I have always found it helpful to look at these two passages together. Both have something to say to us.

In Matthew the whole experience seems to be described as a vision. It is narrated in vivid terms and involves both visual and sound sensations, but it has so much more to say to us. Even if we were able to have a recording of what actually happened, we could not fully understand the sense of awe that is to be discerned in the narrative.

R T France wrote: "We cannot, and need not, know what a cine-camera on the mountain would have recorded; in the experience of the disciples heaven has invaded the earth and the superhuman glory of the Messiah has been revealed."

I balance that thought with the fact that the disciples would have to return to the reality of those things that are challenging and not hidden in cloud, but so patently easy to see and difficult to address.

Daniel Niles, the Methodist leader from Sri Lanka, spoke of two conversions: one to Jesus Christ ... and the other to the world. Faith always sees beyond itself to the needs of others. On the mountainside we can discern the power that enables us to return to face whatever challenges lie before us.

### **What kind of listening is required?**

How many of us can recall the classroom as children when the teacher asked, "Are you listening?" We could all put our own name into such an experience.

This passage quite clearly reminds us of the importance of worship. For me it suggests that we cannot comprehend the deepest mysteries without God's help.

In the season of Lent that will soon be upon us, we shall give ourselves to self-examination and repentance for the sake of inner-peace. It is hard to take an honest look at our lives, but to do so in the presence of God is an experience we must afford ourselves.

As we have established, we must resist the impulse to want to live on the mountainside, but it is important because often it is the context of our listening.

We must listen for God's voice, his clear direction for our lives and the ways in which he speaks to us to help us understand just what lies ahead of us. The kind of listening that must be our experience is the listening which will lead to change.

The word "transfigure" is most closely associated with our word "metamorphose" and is used again in two very important New Testament contexts.

"Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will." (Romans 12:2)



“And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with an ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.” (2 Corinthians 3:18)

The kind of listening that is required is that which is able to make the vital link between the spiritual reality of living in God’s presence and the living alongside the real difficulties of this world.

Tom Long, a distinguished writer on preaching, engaged in a study of worship with dozens of congregations which was eventually published. Among his insights, Tom said that faithful worship must be a mix of mystical, transcendent moments combined with real, contemporary engagement with issues, questions, problems, and concerns that are going on right now – a mix of the eternal and the contemporary, the mystical and the mundane.

Another fine writer on preaching and worship, Fred Craddock, tells the story of a woman who spent the day at the spa and had a complete makeover. She was gliding out of the door, feeling all the freshness of the experience and said to herself, “I’m the new me!” Then she paused and said, “Now, where did I park the car?” Down to earth with a bang!

The experience of transfiguration for the disciples – and for us – calls us to listen for God’s voice with our ears open, our hearts alert and with a readiness to respond to the realities of life.