

Sermon - transfigured by God's glory

Based on 2 Kings 2.1-12, 2 Corinthians 4.3-12 and Mark 9.2-9 (NRSV)

The Son of God

- In the whole of Mark's Gospel account there are three moments where Jesus is declared to be the Son of God:
- (1) at the beginning - at his baptism; (2) at the end - when he died on the cross; and (3) in the exact middle - the moment when his closest disciples have a vision of God's glory becoming visibly apparent in Jesus.
 1. When Jesus was baptised, he submitted in humility and obedience to share with humanity the need to be cleansed from all that disconnects us from God, and to intentionally turn back to God.
 2. When Jesus was transfigured, he had just announced - for the first time - that he would suffer at the hands of the religious leaders, be killed, and be resurrected.
 - This was a forewarning of the consequences of God's sacrificial love, enacted through the humility and obedience of Jesus as the Son of God.
 3. And when Jesus then followed through, with that same humility and obedience, and died on the cross, the centurion who was overseeing the crucifixion declared: *'Truly, this man was God's Son.'* (Mark 15.39)

The context of the first half of Mark

- The transfiguration event is the moment when the two main context stories of Mark's Gospel transition from the first to the second.
- Mark starts his Gospel account, in chapter 1 verse 1 by stating: *The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*
- That is, his Gospel account is only the start of the good news - that the good news continues to develop and grow from where his account ends.
- Also, more importantly for what he is wanting to relate to us, he baldly states that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, right from the opening line.
- And then only ten verses later he describes Jesus hearing for himself the words from heaven: *'You are my Son, the Beloved'* (Mark 1.11)
- Note that these words are meant primarily for Jesus himself.
- The voice from heaven doesn't state 'He is my Son', but 'You are my Son'.
- So at this point Jesus knows this, and the reader of the gospel knows this, but no-one else does.
- Well, the demons who come into his presence also know, but Jesus quickly binds them and silences their proclamations, because those are intended to be harmful - those utterances, no matter how true, are not made in accordance with God's purpose.
- So Mark's first context story is about people questioning who Jesus is and the source of his authority, as they encounter his ministry, his teaching and his acts of deliverance, healing and restoration.
- Throughout the first eight chapters the disciples and everyone else are trying to figure out who Jesus is, until six days before the transfiguration he asks his disciples *'Who do you say that I am?'* and Peter answers *'You are the Messiah'* (Mark 8.29), that is, the Christ.
- The disciples have reached a point where they are now ready to go deeper in their faith understanding, even though they still have a long way to go - because even Peter cannot yet name Jesus as the Son of God.

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Like Moses up the mountain

- And so we come to the story of the transfiguration, which is rich in symbolism, referring back to the experiences that both Moses and Elijah had in engaging directly with God on mountain peaks.
- Listen to these passages from Exodus:

Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. (Exodus 24.15-17)

As [Moses] came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, [he] did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him. (Exodus 34.29-30)
- So the description that Mark gives in his account references many different aspects of Moses interacting with God, and receiving the Law:
- There is a wait of six days before encountering God, suggestive of the six days of creation before the day which becomes the Sabbath - the day set aside for interacting with God.
- They go up a mountain and are covered by a cloud.
- God's glory is like a devouring fire - similar to the chariot of fire and the horses of fire that Elisha witnesses Elijah being caught up in.
- Moses' face ends up shining, though in Jesus' case even his clothes are transformed by the light within.
- And those who witness these events are fearful of what is beyond their normal experience.

Moses and Joshua - Jesus and Moses

- There is another interesting detail:

Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and ... went up into the mountain of God. (Exodus 24.13)
- Now the name Joshua and the name Jesus are both anglicised forms of the name *Yeshua* - which means 'he rescues' or 'he delivers'.
- Both Joshua and Jesus would have been called *Yeshua*, in Hebrew or Aramaic.
- So Moses goes up the mountain with his assistant *Yeshua*, or Joshua.
- And in the transfiguration event, Moses meets with *Yeshua*, or Jesus, the Son of God.
- All of this would have been apparent to the disciples - perhaps not at the time because they were so overwhelmed by the experience, but certainly later on when they reflected upon it.

The priority of Jesus' teaching

- For us Christians there is also a fundamental teaching - I would even suggest as being emphatically doctrinal.
- Moses and Elijah are potent symbols - representations - of the Law and the Prophets.
- The Hebrew or Jewish Bible is what we call the Old Testament - all the books from Genesis to Malachi.
- These books, and all that they teach, *are* the Law and the Prophets.
- Moses and Elijah directly represent the Old Testament, also known as the Old Covenant.
- Jesus not only represents, but directly manifests the New Testament, also known as the New Covenant.

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- And what does the voice from heaven state?

'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!' (Mark 9.7)

- The heavenly voice tells us to give precedence to the words of Jesus over the words of Moses and Elijah - over the words of the Old Testament, the Law and the Prophets.
- Of course, we should know this, because we count ourselves as Christians, followers of Jesus Christ, rather than as Jews, followers of Moses.
- And yet all too often individual Christians, and parts of the Church, give precedence to the law of Moses - to the writings of the Old Testament, over the teachings of Christ.
- All too often we see engraved, or embossed in gilt, the words of the Ten Commandments which prescribe behaviour, rather than, say, the Beatitudes which describe blessing.
- All too often we see words from Deuteronomy being used to narrowly define what we might think God finds acceptable, rather than the words of Jesus which prioritise love, compassion and forgiveness - all undertaken with humility.
- One of the most important disciplines we can exercise when studying the Bible, or when asking God to speak to us through Holy Scripture, is that whenever we encounter something that doesn't seem to tie in with what Jesus teaches, that we then give priority to the words of Jesus.
- Even when we look at the rest of the New Testament writings - the words of Paul and others - our priority must always be firstly with the teachings of Jesus.
- Jesus is the lens by which we are able to see more clearly the divine intent in the words, when we might otherwise become biased by the human intent of the writer.

The glory within

- With this in mind, we can reflect briefly upon one more aspect of the transfiguration event.
- Last week we heard how, when Jesus touched Simon Peter's sick mother-in-law, instead of the sickness spreading to Jesus, the wholeness of Jesus spread to the sick woman, and she was restored to good health.
- In a similar way, God's glory seems to impact differently upon Jesus compared to what happened to Moses.
- For Moses, the glory came from without - from outside of him - so that his face shone.
- Whereas for Jesus, God's glory appears to come from within, so that not only does Jesus metamorphasise, even his clothes cannot contain the glory they hold, and become dazzling white from the light within.
- Jesus becomes in that moment the embodiment of God's glory.
- Now wonder the disciples are confused, and Peter babbles about trying to make this moment of revelation last.
- Nevertheless, they are soon alone with Jesus again, but also with the divine words ringing in their ears: *'This is my Son.'*
- They come down from the mountain with a deeper faith knowledge.
- The rest of Mark's Gospel then has this second context story: the disciples now know for themselves who Jesus is, and where he derives his authority - the source of his wisdom and transforming command.
- Their knowledge is still limited, in that they do not comprehend why Jesus talks about his anticipated suffering and death, and then allows those events to play out.
- It is only after the resurrection that the disciples finally start to understand the meaning and implications of those events.
- And it is then that Peter, James and John recall and share with others this moment when they were blessed with the divine revelation of who Jesus was.

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- As Paul describes in his letter to the Corinthians: *it is God ... who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. (2 Corinthians 4.6)*
- And Mark shares the disciples' description of this event with us, so that we too may recognise and acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God.
- That we too may be directed to listen to his teaching, and follow his way.
- And give him the glory. Amen.