

Exodus 24:12-18; Matthew 17:1-9

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### *Transfigured / disfigured*

In many ancient cultures mountain are holy places. They are places associated with the divine, places where the dividing wall between heaven and earth is thin. And one way of getting a handle on Matthew's Gospel is to consider the mountains that appear in it. So in recent weeks as we have studied this Gospel we have found ourselves on one prominent mountain that features – we don't even know it's name, but we do know that upon it Jesus preached a sublime sermon that has been remembered ever since and known as The Sermon on the Mount. There Jesus is presented as a kind of new Moses, as he reinterpreted the ancient law that God had given Moses on Mt Sinai centuries before, breathing new life into it.

Today, however, we move to another mountain in Matthew – again, we don't know its name - and there we witness this extraordinary and mysterious incident. Peter, James and John, Jesus' inner circle of disciples, are led up a high mountain and there they encounter two great figures from Israel's past, Moses and Elijah, and there they see Jesus transfigured, shining like the very sun – even as Moses' face once shone when he received that Law on Mt Sinai. And Peter wants to build shelters, to preserve the moment, but then comes a cloud and a voice, the same voice that echoed over the waters of the River Jordan at Jesus' baptism, 'This is my Son, the beloved, with him I am well pleased.' And the disciples are terrified, falling on their faces, and we are told that Jesus comes to them and touches them, saying, 'rise up; and do not be afraid'. And then Moses and Elijah are gone, vanished, and Jesus and these disciples are on their way back down the mountain. And as we read on we find Jesus immersed once more in the pain and suffering of the world, as a man with an epileptic son, threatened with self-destruction, pleads with Jesus to heal him.

So those are two prominent mountains silhouetted on the landscape of Matthew's Gospel: the mount of the sermon and the mount of transfiguration. There is, however, a third mountain which is looming ahead in the distance. If we go back to the previous chapter, chapter 16, we find these words, 'From that time Jesus began to make it clear to his disciples that he had to go to Jerusalem, and endure great sufferings at the hands of the elders, chief priests, and scribes; to be put to death, and to be raised again on the third day.' In other words Jesus' eyes are already turned toward that mountain that lies ahead of him at

the end of his journey, that mountain known as Mt Zion where Jerusalem is sited and to that hill outside Jerusalem, called Golgotha, where he will suffer upon a cross.

Three mountains, then, in Matthew – where Jesus taught, and where Jesus was transfigured and where he suffered and died, and what we need to see is the way they are connected and related to one another. Take the first mountain where Jesus preached his great sermon. There he spelt out a manifesto for God's Kingdom. There he told his followers how they are to live if they are to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. But we have to ask, why should anyone listen to Jesus? Why should anyone listen to him and pay heed to his teaching? Why should we believe his astonishing and possibly blasphemous claim that he is here expounding the very heart and soul of God's ancient Law? Well, everything depends upon who Jesus is. Everything depends upon what authorisation he has for presuming to speak in God's name. And that brings us to this second mountain, for here, in the presence of the authoritative figures of Moses and Elijah Jesus is transfigured, glowing with the glory of God, alive with the light of God. And there then follow these words, 'This is my beloved son I whom I take delight; *listen to him!*' Do you get it? Here on this mountain is the authorisation for the sermon given on the previous mountain. Here is the authentication of Jesus' radical, revolutionary teaching. Here stands one greater than Moses, greater than Elijah, radiant with the divine glory – so listen to him! His teaching has the full weight of God's backing!

Now, however, we must turn to that third mountain, Golgotha, where Jesus suffered and died and here we need to note a very strange connection between it and the mount of transfiguration That is the way in which one is a contrast, a kind of mirror image of the other. Let's look at some examples. Here, on the mountain of the transfiguration, Jesus' clothes shine with the glory of God; there, at the crucifixion, you may recall that the soldiers gambled for Jesus' clothes. What a contrast – from glowing with glory to pawns in a gambling game. Again, here in the transfiguration story Jesus is surrounded by two great heroes from ancient history, Moses and Elijah; there, on the cross, Jesus is surrounded by what? By two common criminals. Again, this scene of transfiguration is one of dazzling light, while at the crucifixion, what happens? Yes, Matthew tells us that darkness came over the whole land. Or notice - here, in the transfiguration, Jesus basks in God's presence and we hear the voice

declaring God's delight in Jesus. There Jesus suffers the hell of God's absence as he cries out, 'My God why have you forsaken me?' And this time there is no voice – only silence. Here on the mountain of transfiguration God proclaims, 'this is my son, the beloved!' There, on Golgotha, in utter abandonment, it is left to a Roman centurion to blurt out, 'truly this man was God's son.'

We could go on – so many contrasts. It seems almost as if the hellish scene on Golgotha is a parody of this moment of glory on the mountain. It's as if the crucifixion deliberately reverses the Transfiguration. One reflects heaven, the other hell. One inverts the other. One is transfiguration, the other disfiguration. And with that in mind, let me tell you about another inversion of this story, something that I find deeply disturbing. We are considering this story of the Transfiguration here in February, just prior to the season of Lent. But there is another day in the year when Christians remember this story. Since 1455, the Feast of the Transfiguration has been held on August 6<sup>th</sup>, and I wonder if anyone can tell me what else happened on August 6<sup>th</sup>. To be more precise, what happened on August 6<sup>th</sup> 1945? Well, it was the day chosen to drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Now just think about it: that was the day of blinding light followed by a cloud – only this time the light of nuclear explosion followed by the mushroom cloud. That was the day when matter radiated with energy and light, not with dazzling divine glory but with the flash of hell itself. That was the day when all shelters and habitations were unmade, destroyed; that was the day when, like Moses and Elijah, people were suddenly gone, vanished, only this time vapourised, leaving only shadows of their outlines on walls. On that day creation glowed, not in splendour and radiance but in unimaginable destruction. There glorious transfiguration was inverted into demonic disfiguration. There was Golgotha all over again, in all its grotesque distortion.

So, put these two things together, the transfiguration and the crucifixion, the mount of glory and the mount of Golgotha, the exalted Christ and Hiroshima, and you see two things about us human beings. On the one hand you see the heights for which we as human beings have been created. You see us high on the mountain top, like Moses of old, luminous with the divine presence. We have been created that we might shine. And one day we shall. This is salvation, to bask in the presence of God, part of a creation whose very matter is destined one day to glow with transfigured glory. Indeed it's very significant that this story begins with the words '6 days later Jesus took with

him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain' for '6 days later' is meant to make us think of Sabbath, the Sabbath day. So there is a Sabbath quality about this mountain top experience and the Sabbath in the Bible is the goal of creation. It is the fulfilment of creation. It is where we find rest and completion. It is what we have been made for. It's what we are meant for. But we also see here the contrast, the depths to which we have fallen. We see ourselves at the foot of the mountain, with that distraught father and his tormented son – disfigured. And we see ourselves reflected too at Golgotha. We see ourselves among the soldiers gambling away the very clothes that had shone with divine presence. And we see ourselves in that tortured figure on the cross, crying out in the darkness. Here we see the highs and lows, the exaltation and the degradation of the human race.

Above all, however - and crucially - we see Jesus on both mountains. There he is on the mount of transfiguration – but also on mount Golgotha. And what he is doing is lifting us from one to the other: taking us from disfiguration to transfiguration, from darkness to light, from death to Sabbath and salvation and life. Here is what we might call the great arc of grace – that straddles these two mountains, transferring us from one to the other.

Thinking about this I am reminded of an anecdote that comes from the 1<sup>st</sup> World War, where somewhere along the Western Front shells are bursting, and bodies are strewn, broken and disfigured. And one young soldier, not much more than a boy, turns to a comrade and says, "We weren't meant for this." We weren't meant for this – that says it all. We weren't meant to see our children suffer like that anguished father at the foot of the mountain. We weren't meant for Golgotha. We weren't meant for Hiroshima. We weren't meant for war. We weren't meant to be displaced from our homes and to wander the earth seeking for shelter and for rest. We weren't meant for refugee camps and for hunger and malnutrition. In fact, just think of all the thousands of occasions when we might look at human life and say, 'we weren't meant for this'. That phrase should course through the veins of every Christian like a mantra. No, we were meant for the mountain of transfiguration. We were meant to shine like the stars. We were meant for glory. We were meant for Sabbath. We were meant to listen to him – living as Christ taught us to live on that other mountain.

So we have it: transfiguration or disfiguration? Exaltation or degradation? This mountain or Golgotha? And Christ has come and has completed that arc of grace, transferring us from one mountain to the other.

Praise God that because of him we may shout with our words and our deeds and our lives, 'we were meant for this!'