

Gospel of Mark 17 – Chapter 9, verses 2 – 29:- The Transfiguration and then back to reality!

Traditionally the Mount of Transfiguration is Mount Tabor in Galilee. However this is unlikely as there was a town on its summit in New Testament times and it is 50 miles or so from Caesarea Philippi. As we noted last week, Mount Hermon is more likely.

Verses 2 – 8:- The ‘core group’ of disciples, Peter, James and John (c.f. Mark chapter 5, verse 37) were witnesses to this key event; although forbidden to speak of it until after the resurrection (verse 9). That it was used as a proof text for the truthfulness of the disciples’ testimony we can see in 2 Peter, chapter 1, verses 16 – 18. The word used for “*transfigured*” (verse 2) is literally “*metamorphosed*” (“*metamorphoo*”) This was a change of essential form, not a superficial change of outward appearance. Our Lord’s human body was glorified and it is in this glorified body that he will some day come to establish his kingdom.

Some knowledge of the Old Testament is helpful in digging deeper into the meaning of the event. Moses and Elijah can be seen as representing the Law and the Prophets. Each of them had a vision of God on a mountain - Moses on Sinai (Exodus chapter 24, verse 15 - 18) and Elijah on Horeb (1 Kings chapter 19, verse 8 - 13). Each of them had no known grave (Deuteronomy chapter 34, verse 6 and 2 Kings chapter 2, verse 11). The Law of Moses and the coming of Elijah are mentioned together in the last verses of the Old Testament – Malachi chapter 4, verses 4 – 6. In the Gospel of Luke we are told that the subject of their conversation was the “*departure*” (literally “*exodos*”) which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem. (Luke chapter 9, verse 30 - 31). This seems to mean not simply his death, but the great facts of his death and resurrection as the means of redemption of his people, typified by the Old Testament Exodus from Egypt.

The Transfiguration is a focal point in the revelation of the Kingdom of God. It looks back on the Old Testament and shows how the Lord Jesus Christ fulfils it, and it looks forward to the great events of the Cross, Resurrection, Ascension and the coming of the Kingdom. Peter was wrong in trying to ‘capture’ the experience and make it permanent. What was needed was the presence of Jesus alone and attention to his voice.

Verses 9 – 13:- The prohibition to speak was in keeping with the policy of restraint lest the Messianic ideas of the crowd should be fanned into flames. After the Resurrection the danger of a popular uprising would no longer be present.

The question concerning Elijah could have been because the disciples were wondering if the appearance on the mount was the fulfilment of the prediction in Malachi chapter 4, verses 5 – 6. The coming of Elijah was predicted in the Scriptures. The Lord Jesus emphasises that the Scriptures also predict that the Son of Man “*must suffer much and be treated with contempt*” (verse 12). There was a sense in which Elijah had already come. Matthew chapter 17, verse 13 explains that Jesus was talking about John the Baptist. John did not claim to be Elijah in person, but that he came in the likeness of Elijah (see Luke chapter 1, verse 17 and John chapter 1, verse 21).

Verses 15 – 29:- This passage emphasises the fact that a great spiritual experience is followed by an encounter with evil, unbelief and depression! Compare with the experience of Moses, Exodus chapter 24, verses 9 – 11 and chapter 32, verses 15 – 20. Also that of Elijah in 1 Kings chapter 18, verses 36 – 40 and chapter 19, verses 3 – 14.

It is clear that the failure of the disciples to heal the boy was due to their unbelief – verse 19. Remember that these disciples included nine of the twelve given authority over unclean spirits (Mark chapter 6, verse 7). The reply to the question “*why could we not cast it out?*” (verse 28) implies that the disciples had attempted to cast out the demon without relying upon God’s power. (compare with Matthew chapter 17, verse 20). Unbelief and prayerlessness are sure to result in spiritual weakness. So often we have to echo the words of the boy’s father in this story - “*Lord, I believe! Help my unbelief!*”

*A safe stronghold our God is still,
a trusty shield and weapon;
He'll keep us clear from all the ill
that hath us now o'ertaken.
The ancient prince of hell
hath risen with purpose fell;
Strong mail of craft and power
he weareth in this hour;
On earth is not his fellow.*

*With force of arms we nothing can,
full soon were we downridden;
but for us fights the proper man
Whom God himself hath bidden.
Ask ye, who is this same?
Christ Jesus is his name
The Lord Sabaoth's Son;
He and no other one,
Shall conquer in the battle.*

*And were this world all devils o'er,
and watching to devour us.
we lay it not to heart so sore;
not they can overpower us.
And let the prince of ill
look grim as e'er he will.
He harms us not a whit;
for why? His doom is writ.
A word shall quickly slay him!*

Martin Luther (1483 – 1546) translated by Thomas Carlyle (1795 - 1881)