



KIAMA ANGLICAN CHURCHES

Sermon Series:

PERSPECTIVE – Seeing Jesus, Jesus' Way

Sermon:

Two Witnesses - The Transfiguration

Kim Thomason, 20 March 2022

When I was a teenager and first attending a church youth group, I was told that Jesus is my friend. My history, my understanding of 'friends' filtered that information. From my perspective I knew that friends were people who could be good, more likely mean and who were not to be trusted fully. I wasn't particularly nice either and consequently, I didn't want to know Jesus.

However, when I heard sermons that spoke of God as my Father, well, that was a different matter. I wanted to know more. My history assured me that fathers were good. My perspective was that fathers love you no matter what and they could be trusted completely. My expectations of what I read in the Bible were filtered through the experiences of my history.

Although we don't tend to do this consciously and, possibly, we don't like to think that we do it at all, the reality is that we all read the Bible through filters. Our understanding of life generally is filtered through lenses such as our worldview (what we think and believe, our culture) what we collectively esteem and share, our education, our family, gender, age, experiences and our expectations of what we think should happen. Filters in themselves are not inherently right or wrong. We simply need to be conscious of them, of our own bias or preconceived ideas and, as we study God's Word, be willing to be transformed through the renewing of our minds as we begin to understand things from God's perspective.

We're continuing our Perspective series in Matthew's gospel today, looking specifically at chapter 17, verses 1-13, more generally known as The Transfiguration. In this passage, the disciples are about to have their perspective changed.

As we're committed to God's Vision for his church here in Kiama, and the first component of that Vision is that we are called to be prayerful, let's pray and ask God to challenge our perspectives and to transform our lives as we meet him in this passage.

Heavenly Father, We have so much to learn about you and we understand so little. As we read your Word today, please deepen our understanding, challenge our thinking to see people and events from your perspective and, through the power of your Spirit, convict and transform us to be more like your Son, Jesus. Amen.

Have you ever had a great spiritual moment? A time when you recall feeling the presence of God... deeply personal... deeply assuring... memorable. Maybe you can't recall a great spiritual moment. That's okay. Jesus had twelve disciples and, in the great spiritual moment recorded in this passage, nine of the disciples aren't there.

Well, the great spiritual moment / 'mountain top' experience we're looking at today was for Jesus and three of his disciples - Peter, James and John. It's found in Matthew chapter 17.

Just prior to this, at the end of the previous chapter, Jesus predicted his death and stated that,

...'some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.'

Our passage today commences with the words, 'after six days', and the inclusion of this timeframe is important because these three disciples are about to witness the beginning of that promise being fulfilled. Jesus is about to be transfigured before them. They will have a new perspective.

Matthew's gospel is all about promise and fulfilment. The disciples are learning that Jesus is the fulfilment of God's promise. Jesus is the one to whom all the Law and the Prophets have been pointing. Jesus is the one they have been looking for.

So, what happens? Jesus leads the three disciples up the mountain and he is transfigured. He radiates light, not just his face, which is shining like the sun, but his clothes become as white as light. To be

transfigured means your appearance has changed and the disciples are now seeing Jesus in, literally, a new light. God is revealing his glory in the transfiguration of Jesus!

Just then, another two witnesses appear. The disciples see Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus. As if the transfiguration of Jesus wasn't enough, Moses and Elijah join the party. These are two men we know from the Old Testament. God called Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, he conveyed God's law to the people and, amongst other things, Moses was known for his shining face. We heard about Elijah in the Bible reading from Malachi but most references to Elijah are recorded in 1 & 2 Kings. Elijah was a prophet; he prayed - things happened. And he had what we would probably describe these days as 'an amazing ministry'. We'd probably subscribe to his YouTube channel and follow him on Instagram. So, what's the significance of the presence of Moses and Elijah appearing with Jesus at this time? What is it that is God revealing for us to understand?

Well, from our 21st century perspective, we may consider Moses and Elijah as significant historical figures. We may concede that these were great men of faith.

But Matthew's gospel was not written in the 21st century. It was written in the first century to a predominantly Jewish audience... to people who knew their Old Testament Scriptures... to people who were looking for the fulfilment of God's promised Messiah... their Messiah... the Messiah they imagined as a triumphant, conquering Saviour who would liberate them from oppression... the Messiah they imagined who would overthrow the Romans and establish his kingdom with the power and commanding presence of a military King!

The Messiah God promised is Jesus.

If we want to understand the significance of Moses and Elijah in this passage, we need to understand the cultural and religious expectations

surrounding this event and grasp the significance of these men for the Jewish listeners and readers of Matthew's gospel.

To the Jewish people, Moses represented the Law and Elijah represented the Prophets, and their inclusion signifies the breadth and depth of Israel's history and achievements. The whole Old Testament has been pointing to Jesus and here, the greatest figures in Israel's history are present and standing beside Jesus during this mountaintop experience. Their presence signifies the importance of Jesus. It's a bit like when the heads of Commonwealth government meet with the Queen. Although you and I might fancy a trip to London and would happily share a cup of tea and pat the corgis, we're not invited. The Prime Ministers across the Commonwealth attend; their presence signifies the importance of the Queen as head of the Commonwealth and conveys the authority of their leadership.

In Matthew chapter 5 Jesus states that he hasn't come to abolish the Law and the Prophets but to fulfil them. Jesus' fulfilment of the promise ushers in God's kingdom and gives the Israelites a future. Certainly not the one many of them envisaged with a military, conquering King, but actually it's far greater.

It's a future that will include people from all tribes and all nations... a future that will include suffering and service and, for Jesus, a humiliating death on a cross and resurrection three days later. Jesus is the promised Suffering Servant Messiah.

The account then moves on to Peter's response. I really like Peter. He says what's on his mind and there's not always a filter. It's as though his feet are competing to see which one, left or right, will end up in his mouth first. Sometimes it appears that they both win.

So, here's Peter, standing with James and John, witnessing this amazing event and he offers to put up three shelters - one for Jesus, one for Moses and one for Elijah. He's offering an act of service that gives him

something to do; he's a man of action and this may well reflect his desire to prolong the mountain top experience for everyone. Peter is very good at 'doing' and, perhaps like many of us, not so good at 'being'.

However, God will have none of it. Peter needs to learn a very important lesson and he needs to learn it now. While Peter is still speaking, a bright cloud covers them, and God speaks.

'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!'

These are the words from Jesus' baptism recorded in Matthew chapter 3. God publicly endorsed Jesus at the commencement of his ministry and here, although less publicly, Jesus receives God's endorsement as he continues on the road to the cross... words of love and affirmation.

So, what did Peter need to learn? Peter offered to put up three shelters as if Moses and Elijah are standing beside Jesus as his equal. But they are not equal. Moses and Elijah, representing all the Law and the Prophets are great men in the history of Israel, but there is only one Son. Peter needed to learn that Jesus is the greatest. Jesus is God's Son. The Law and the Prophets spoke of God's promise and Jesus is the fulfilment. 'Listen to him!'

Unsurprisingly, the disciples fall face down on the ground and they're terrified. This whole experience has been mind blowing and now they've heard the voice of God. Jesus tells them not to be afraid and when they get up, Moses and Elijah are gone. Did you notice, Peter's not talking about shelters anymore. The disciples are to look to Jesus. Moses and Elijah have completed their work - pointing the Israelites to Jesus. Jesus is God's Son, the one he loves, the one with whom he is well pleased, and we must listen to him!

As they're coming down the mountain, Jesus then instructs the disciples not to tell anyone about what they've seen until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead. But really, it's the kind of thing

you'd want to tell everybody, isn't it?! Can you imagine dining out on that? Have I got a story to tell you! You'll never guess who I saw on the weekend.

But Jesus says, 'Don't'. 'Don't tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.' Why would he do that? Why would he tell them to wait to speak until after his resurrection? What is it that they need to learn?

Let's go back to what was said earlier about the expectations of the Messiah as a powerful, conquering King, great and mighty. At this stage there's no room in their thinking or their understanding of suffering, of humility, of grace extending beyond Israel. They're expecting a Messiah coming with power without an understanding of how God will demonstrate his power. To share that mountaintop experience with other people at this point would potentially reinforce their incorrect perspective. Jesus must continue his journey to the cross. He must suffer and die and, on the third day, be raised to life – the suffering servant bringing people into his kingdom with sacrificial love. So, Jesus instructs them not to tell anyone about this until after he's been raised from the dead. The disciple's understanding of the promised Messiah had to be fundamentally and radically transformed.

Let's pause for a moment and consider our own expectations of Jesus. How comfortable are we with the promise of a suffering servant? With the reality that by following Jesus we might suffer too. How about our expectations of an all-powerful God who chooses to exercise his power with love and grace when at times we might prefer his targeted wrath, not for ourselves of course, but for those we deem worthy recipients of an almighty ZAP!

What are we expecting of Jesus? Do we live as though he should bless all our plans? Do we expect Jesus to reward our faith with a happy, comfortable life? Lots of friends? Good finances? Not too much money necessarily, but poverty means we'd have trouble being generous and

it might impede our lifestyle. That would certainly go against our cultural perspective of success. Are we praying for revival and expecting Jesus to work around our schedules and assuming that he'll only do things how we like them done? Are we willing for the Spirit to move and expecting Jesus to transform lives?

Our perspective of Jesus need to be based on what God says about his own Son. The promise of a Messiah who would suffer was there in the Old Testament, but the disciples filtered their expectations of the Messiah through their cultural lenses of power based on their history. It's also very easy for us to overlay our culture and then think that what we believe is absolutely biblical, when in reality we may be filtering all manner of things and, like the Israelites, hold a distorted view of God and expectations of his promises that aren't quite right.

I think it takes humility, particularly when we've been Christians for many years, to embrace a deeper understanding of God than what we've always thought and believed... to have our view of God expanded. At the transfiguration the disciples saw Jesus in a new light, heard the voice of God and were terrified. Change can be challenging. The disciples' expectations and understandings were well and truly challenged but, as was revealed to the disciples, Jesus is God's only Son and we are to listen to him!

In the final part of this passage Jesus and the disciples talk about Elijah.

'Why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?'

That's a good question!

Jewish teaching held that Elijah would come as a fearsome reformer, destroying evil and preparing the world for the Messiah. Elijah and the Messiah were both thought of in terms of power. This understanding of power needed to be corrected. The Jewish leaders were still looking for Elijah because they had rejected John the Baptist. John had come to

prepare the way and he'd been killed. John's death pointed to Jesus' suffering and Jesus states that he, the Son of Man, will also suffer.

This passage, the transfiguration, makes it abundantly clear that Jesus is God's Son, and we are to listen to him. Let's consider what this means for us here in Kiama.

We've just launched the five-year Vision for this church. That is, we have articulated what we believe God is calling us to do, using the gifts and resources God has given to build his kingdom. We are to be prayerful, listening to Jesus, learning together from his Word and responding to the convictions of his Spirit. We are called to trust God that as we learn and serve together, that as we encourage one another in deeply connected relationships, that as we wrestle with differences of theological interpretation and choose to demonstrate love and grace, God's Spirit will convict and transform our lives. We are praying for an outpouring of God's Spirit to bring revival. Potentially this is a time of great change and deep blessings.

I'm not talking about change for the sake of just doing something different. Rather, it's about aligning our thinking and our actions, aligning our very lives to be, as Paul writes to the Galatians, 'in step with the Spirit.'

At the transfiguration the disciples saw Jesus in a new light. Their perspective was changed.

The Transfiguration challenges us to consider our perspectives. As we pray for revival, as we seek God's mercy for an outpouring of his Spirit throughout this land, as we connect and learn across all generations, we need to be willing to consider new things... to serve wherever God leads us... to learn alongside each other... to have the humility required to seek and to learn new things. We may need to put aside our own agendas, what we think should happen, how we think things should be done. We need to pray and to keep praying, 'Your will be done.'

This is God's church. We are God's people. God sets the agenda.



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