Mountains, Valleys and Transforming Glory
Matthew 17

Sometimes life can seem like a roller-coaster, can't it? One minute you're at the top and things are great, and all is light, but the next, something goes wrong and it feels like you are hurtling to the bottom and it's dark. And last week we saw the disciples experience just that. One minute Simon Peter had this moment of insight where he clearly saw who Jesus was; the next, Jesus tells them he's going to suffer and die. But as we look at this morning's passage, that rollercoaster ride continues, because the one who will suffer and die is transfigured before them in burning glory.

Reading: Matthew 17:1-27

We're going to look at three things this morning: Who Jesus is; Why he's the one you should trust; And the transforming power he can have in your life.

Who Jesus Is
When you're getting to know someone there can be those moments when you see something of what they're really like – and it catches you a bit off guard: you see a flash of anger, and you think, 'wow, so that's what they're like'; or they crack a joke and you think, 'ok, he's a physicist, but he's got a sense of humour, wow!' And for a moment you get this insight into what they're really like, underneath. And Jesus takes three of his disciples up a mountain, and they see a flash, they catch a glimpse of who Jesus really is, underneath, and it doesn't just catch them off-guard, it's life shattering.

Verses 1-2, 'Jesus… led them up a high mountain… and he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light.' And it's as if Jesus' disguise drops, and these men see the real him – in all his glory, shining like the sun, burning like the light. So who is he?

Well, Matthew says that two other figures stood beside him, v3: 'And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.' And in the Old Testament, Moses also climbed a mountain with three of his friends, and he encountered God in all his glory, and when he came down his face shone. But that was a reflected glory. But if Moses was like the moon, Jesus is the sun – because his burning glory is coming from within him. It's why the writer to the Hebrews says of Jesus, 'He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature' (Heb 1:3).

You see, think what Moses and Elijah are doing there. Both of them were miracle-working prophets. Both of them experienced rejection. Both of them encountered God on mountains. Both of them were expected to reappear in some way in the Messianic age. And Moses represented the Law, and Elijah the Prophets, both of which pointed towards the coming Messiah. But in this vision, these two are just supporting actors, and at the end they fade away, and only Jesus is left.

Why? Because Jesus isn't just another Moses or Elijah. He's not just another person pointing us *to* God. He's *the* representation of God – he's in a league of his own. He's the radiance of his glory, the exact representation of his being. And

nothing compares to him. And the Law and the Prophets pointed to him, like a guide points to the peak of a mountain. But if they're the guides, Jesus is the pinnacle, the apex of God's revelation. And he burns like the sun in all its brilliance.

Now, have you ever been in a situation where you're nervous, maybe you're talking with someone important, and you say something and afterwards you think, 'why did I say that?' I remember my first job interview as a junior doctor for a job I really wanted, and I'd rehearsed answers to questions and things I wanted to say, and the chairman on the panel asked me the first question and in response I blurted out a prepared answer that had nothing to do with what he was asking, and I felt a total fool!

Well, look at Peter here. Why do you think he says what he says about the tents? Is it the nerves of the moment? Verse 4, 'and Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah."' Is it nerves, or fear, and he says something stupid – like, 'hey, we could all camp out'? Well, the word he uses for tent is the same word for the tabernacle that housed the burning glory of God in the wilderness. The tent that protected the people from the dangerous holiness of God that dwelt in their midst.

And maybe Peter understands whose presence he is in. And like a radioactive nuclear core needs shielding around it, to protect those outside, Peter feels that need of protection. At least he does when the cloud comes down. Verse 5, 'He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them', or 'enveloped them'.

Now, just think about that. You see, how did God lead the people of Israel out of Egypt? Or how did he come down upon Sinai and meet with Moses? Or how did his glory take up residence in the tabernacle and the temple – by a burning cloud, the Shekinah glory of God's presence. And Matthew says this cloud is bright – it's alive with light, and as it comes down they hear this voice coming from the cloud, and they instinctively know who it is who is speaking and they're terrified. Why? Because they think what everyone else who ever experienced something similar in the Old Testament thought – that they are about to die.

But they don't die. Because Jesus doesn't just radiate God's glory, he's also the tabernacle that houses it. As John writes at the beginning of his gospel: 'The Word became flesh and dwelt among us [literally, tabernacled, pitched his tent among us] and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.' (John 1:14). In other words, Jesus is the glory of God, burning it all its consuming brightness, but he's also the one who protects us and shields us from that glory.

Now I've recently finished a book that describes the great Triumph, the victory parade given to the Roman general Pompeii, after he'd returned from defeating Rome's enemies. And as Pompeii was paraded through the streets, the crowds lining the roads were all yelling out how amazing and awesome he was, how

powerful and great. But stood beside Pompeii in the chariot was a city-appointed slave, whose sole task it was to remind Pompeii not to believe what he was hearing; that he was just a man; that all this glory would soon pass; that he was a mere mortal.

But there's no such city-appointed slave beside Jesus is there? There's no one telling him he's only a man, and that he shouldn't get ideas above his station. Instead the voice comes from the cloud, v5, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." And in the days to come Jesus is going to face stuff that will make the love of God seem a million miles away, stuff that will leave these disciples questioning whether he really is the Messiah. So his Father speaks: You're my Son, I love you, I'm pleased with you.

We all need to hear those words, don't we? To be told that we're ok, that we're loved, that we're approved of. But where can you get that from? We can look for it in social media – hoping that others will give the thumbs up to our latest selfie. Or in our relationships – and we long for the love of a significant other – who knows us as we are and still loves us; or in an affirming community, or at work – and you work hard, too hard, to win the approval of others. Ultimately, these are just signs aren't they, that what we're all hungry for is the voice of the Father – we long to hear what Jesus heard.

So how can you hear those words from God for yourself, about yourself? Religion says, you've got to climb the mountain to God, and you've got to transfigure yourself, you've got to change yourself, by obeying his laws, and then God will accept you and love you. But here, Moses, and the Law, fades away – because he wasn't the real thing, he was just a shadow, pointing to the real thing. Or maybe we think it's the opposite – that self-denial is the root of all evil and by throwing off the rules, by letting our inner selves shine out, and if I'm just true to myself I'll be able to love myself and be loved and accepted by others. But of course, that just results in a self-centredness and self-absorption that cuts us off from true love – whether from God or others.

So how can you hear those words? Well, as this mountain-top experience ends Matthew tells us, v8, 'when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.'

Why He's the One We Should Trust

Now, maybe you go away as a family, or a group of friends, and you have a great holiday, but you come back and within days you have a blazing row. Or, you have this intense spiritual experience and God feels so close; but the next moment you fall on your face in sin, and you go from the mountain to the valley.

And that's what happens here, as Jesus descends the mount of transfiguration and finds a young boy whose life desperately needs to be transfigured. Because if Jesus, burning with light, is at one end of the spectrum of life, this young boy whose life is being mangled by the powers of darkness, is at the other. And we've heard Jesus' Father speaking words of love over Jesus, but now we hear another

father, speaking about *his* beloved son, and imploring Jesus for mercy. And so Jesus, the glorious one, descends into the darkness and brokenness of life.

But he's not the first one to get involved, is he? As the father says in v16, "I brought him to your disciples, and they could not heal him." And yet, Jesus had given them authority to do just this kind of thing. Jesus had given them the authority to heal and cast out demons, and transform the lives of people just like this boy. And yet they had failed, and so in the face of their failure, Jesus does it, and does it, Matthew says, instantaneously: v18, 'And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him, and the boy was healed instantly.'

So if Jesus had given the disciples the authority to do this, why couldn't they do it? Well, that's exactly what they want to know; so they come to him in private, no doubt they're a bit embarrassed having been shown up so publically and ask him, v19, "Why could we not cast it out?"

You see, they clearly thought they should be able to do it, and they'd clearly had previous success. So why not this time? Well, listen to what Jesus says, v20: "Because of your little faith." Ok, so they just needed more faith! They needed to work themselves up more, get more intense about it, believe they could do this more fervently. But that's not what Jesus says, is it? Verse 20 again, "For truly, I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you."

So it's not the size of your faith that moves those mountains, or transforms lives or wins God's approval. It's not oak tree, or redwood, or sequoia tree faith that's needed. It's just a tiny speck of *true* faith, not even an acorn, but a mustard seed sized faith – because it's not faith in yourself, or your ability, or your track record, but faith in Jesus and his ability that can restore broken lives. Including your own.

You see, the expression *to move mountains* was a way of describing overcoming great difficulties. And few things are more difficult than to heal the brokenness of our lives, or others' lives. Whether it's past hurts, or broken relationships, or seeing people move from darkness to light. And our current culture tells us that if you want to see those things happen, you've got to put more faith in yourself. That if you only believe in yourself, or in humanity, enough, you can do this. The problem is, that whilst it seems like we've never put more faith in ourselves, in reality we've never been less happy with ourselves. I mean, how else do you explain the constant drive for more – that if I just have this next thing my life will be better. Or the fascination with celebrity – if only my life was like theirs. Or the demand for plastic surgery or even just gym membership – if my body just looked better; or even, without wanting to trivialise it, the whole issue of transgenderism - it seems we're less happy with ourselves, and how we are, than ever before. So why would we think the answer was inside ourselves?

You see, we see the brokenness of others' lives, or our own, and we wish our lives were different – that they burned with glory, or sparkled with celebrity, or

we long for the approval of others and the acceptance of our Father, yet none of us has the power to do it. And all the time we look to ourselves, to improve ourselves, we'll never see the real change that we want. We'll never be whole ourselves, or bring wholeness and healing to others. But, Jesus says, just the tiniest speck of faith in the right direction, in him, and not in yourself, and these mountain-like problems begin to move. And verse 21 again, 'nothing will be impossible for you.' Nothing that he has called you to do, no act of obedience which you look at and think, 'I can never do that'; nothing that sees his kingdom and his power extend in your life and in the lives of others, will be impossible – if your trust is in him.

His Transforming Power

Well, no sooner has he taken them back up to the top of the rollercoaster with that promise of mountain-moving faith, than they're accelerating down again: v22: 'As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, "The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day." And they were greatly distressed.'

And no wonder – because they're beginning to understand that he's deadly serious about dying. But why would this glorious, radiant Messiah allow himself to be killed? I mean, 'Jesus, what's mountain-moving, what's broken-life mending about dying?' You see they're distressed because they think Jesus' death will spell the end. But what they don't realise is that it's though his death and his resurrection that it all begins and Jesus' life-transforming power can be unleashed in our lives.

You see, here Jesus climbs the mount of transfiguration with three friends. But at his crucifixion, he climbs the hill alone, carrying his cross. In the transfiguration, he is clothed with glory; at the cross he will be stripped naked. At the transfiguration all is light; at the cross darkness envelopes him; at the transfiguration he is flanked by two spiritual giants; at the cross he is crucified between two criminals; at the transfiguration the Father calls out 'this is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased'; at the cross that same Son is abandoned and calls out 'my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' But it's there, at the cross, as he dies in our place, for all our brokenness, for all our failure, for all our lack of faith, and wrongly placed faith, for all our inability to please God, it's there that he secures the greatest of victories.

Because this transfiguration is just the foretaste of his vindication in his resurrection from the dead. You see, think what happens when Jesus died. The curtain of the temple – the very thing that kept God's people separated from that cloud of God's shekinah glory, was torn in two. And like the disciples, we could die in his presence, but instead Jesus dies for us, that we can enter his presence. His transcendent glory could kill us, but he gave up that glory that we might enter it. And not just enter it – but share it.

Matthew finishes this chapter by telling us how Peter was asked whether Jesus pays the two drachma tax or not – a tax that paid for the upkeep of the temple. And in response, Jesus asks Peter, v25, "From whom do kings of the earth take

toll or tax? From their sons or from others?" And Peter replies, 'from others', to which Jesus replies v26, "Then the sons are free." Now, what has that got to do with anything? Why does Matthew add that here? Well, who's the king of the temple that this tax was being collected for? Whose throne was there? Whose glory dwelt there? And the answer is, God. And Jesus is saying that as God's Son he's exempt. But did you notice that he doesn't just say, *the son* is exempt, but the *sons*, plural.

In other words, Jesus brings Peter and the others and you and me into his family. That when you're united with him by faith, when you put your trust in him and not in yourself, he takes you and transforms you, and takes you from being an outsider to an insider, and makes you a son or daughter of God. And now, in him, you too can hear those words, this is my beloved son, this is my beloved daughter, with whom I am well pleased.

So it's not something you need to do to hear those words, it's not a thing you need to have to see your life changed, it's a person you can trust that will transform your life. You see years later when Peter remembered the transfiguration he said, 'we were eyewitnesses of his majesty… when he received honour and glory from God the Father, and the voice was born to him by the Majestic Glory.' (2 Peter 1:16-17). But right before that Peter writes that through Jesus' power, and his precious promises, you and I 'may become partakers of the divine nature' (2 Peter 1:4), that we might share something of his glory, and that our lives can grow ever more like his – in virtue and knowledge and self-control and steadfastness and godliness, and brotherly affection and love – with increasing fruitfulness. In other words, it's the Transfigured One who can transform you.

Do you remember the last thing the voice from the cloud said of Jesus? Verse 5, "Listen to him." Moses and Elijah, the Law and the Prophets, fade into the background – and this is the one you're to listen to. And when you do, when you listen to him with your whole being, when you make him your total Lord, it will radically change your life.

I mean, think about it. You're going to listen to something, aren't you? Something in life is going to shape you and change you. And either Jesus and his word will be what you listen to, or you'll listen to something else. Either he will be what you centre your life on, and decides for you what's right and wrong, or something else will take his place. And maybe it'll be the opinion of others, or the pressures of culture, or your own feelings. But what ever it is, it won't be nothing. And all these other things will try and mold you, but only he has the power to transform you from one degree of glory to another, to change you to become daily more like him.