

St Marks Northbridge, October 2 2022
Matthew 17:1-27 – Christ & Assurance

INTRODUCTION – DISCOVERING MORE OF SOMEONE

Years ago training to become an academic, I attended my first scientific conference at a stunning location on the west coast of France – so stunning, in fact, the curtains were drawn during the day so we weren't distracted from the talks. On the first night of the conference was a dinner and I sat next to a bloke from eastern Europe who I figured must have been a newbie like me since he seemed very quiet and unassuming. I asked him, "So, is this your first conference?" To which he replied, "No, I've been to many of these." Which was true, because the next day as he delivered his talk I discovered to my great embarrassment that he was possibly the most well-known person at the conference, a guy who'd invented a method to transform the field. So I was off to a great start!

It's always a bit of a shock isn't it when someone turns out to be much more important than you realised? Or you discover there's more to someone than meets the eye. Or someone isn't who you thought they were. That can be a very distressing experience if someone you'd trusted, for example, turns out to be habitually dishonest or unfaithful. It can be surprising, like discovering the hard-working migrant worker who cleans your office is actually a highly trained professional whose credentials aren't recognised in Australia. It can be unsettling, like realising someone holds significant authority that you didn't know they had. But sometimes it's comforting, like discovering the first-responder to your first-aid situation is actually a trained doctor.

Matthew's whole narrative account focuses around the question: 'who is Jesus?' And it might seem like Matthew's labouring this point a bit – as if, we get it Matthew, Jesus is important. But his insistence on this issue is instructive: Jesus is not a simple entity and there's always more of Him we can discover and grasp. And the wonderful thing is that discovering and grasping *more* of Jesus always grows assurance for the Christian.

So that's what I hope our experience will be as we examine Ch17 briefly. There are 3 experiences in 3 different locations, each one blessing us with a deeper, clearer understanding of Jesus, and each one in turn a gift of assurance.

First of all the mountain top.

MOUNTAIN TOP (v1-13)

• **Experience**

This wasn't like anything the disciples had experienced before – or would experience after. It really was highly unusual. Even the word to describe it – 'transfiguration' – is ambiguous. It literally means 'transformed': there on the mountain Jesus momentarily took on a form that was other-worldly. His face shone and His clothes were incredibly bright. He was then joined by two of the greatest OT figures – Moses and Elijah – who'd long since passed from the earth. And if that wasn't enough, the group is engulfed in a bright cloud out of which they hear God speak. It was profound and terrifying – and Peter, James and John understandably fell facedown to the ground. Then everything returned to normal. It was a strange and an amazing experience for the 3 disciples.

• **Revelation**

But – it wasn't *merely* a strange and amazing experience. This was a *revelation* from God about His Son Jesus. And it's those brief but incredibly profound words God spoke which bring the meaning of the mountain experience to light. Take a look at those words again in v5: '*While [Peter] was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to Him!"*'

God does something quite surprising here. By saying '*this is my beloved in whom I delight*', He brings together Ps 2 about the coronation of His special King called the Christ, and Is 41 about His special servant

who would suffer for the sin of people. The King and the Servant are one and the same person – and on the mountain God affirms and confirms that this person is Jesus.

And so, Jesus' intense shining on the mountain is if you like a brief 'pulling back of the cosmic curtain', a glimpse of Jesus' incredible splendour as the risen Christ. It's no wonder then that God finished by saying, "Listen to Him!" Notice that He said this in the presence of Moses and Elijah. They're not random participants here. Moses, the one through whom God gave His Law to the people; Elijah, who stands on behalf of all the OT prophets. Together, the entire revelation from God BC. By saying to Peter, James and John – in the presence of Moses and Elijah – "*Listen to Jesus*", God is saying that Jesus, the Christ, is the fulfilment and completion of all that God has to reveal to us.

[Far side illustration: it was at this point that Peter, James and John realised Jesus was much more than they'd previously grasped. They will eventually grasp it in full – just not yet!]

- **Assurance**

So where do we find assurance here? 3 ways.

In the first place, *for Jesus* – who's just begun to set his face resolutely towards Jerusalem where He'll suffer and die. What a precious affirmation this is from His Father. To hear God speak those prophetic words from the OT and know that this horrible path He's following is the Father's will, that His vocation as the Suffering Servant is the *right* one; *and* to be assured of relief and vindication at the end when He rises as Lord: this must have been a *treasure* of help and encouragement for Jesus.

There's also assurance *for the disciples*. Because seeing Jesus in splendour and hearing God speak on the mountain confirmed for them that He really was the Christ, as they thought; that they really were following the right man – even though they were confused on some things like His suffering; and that they really were safe with Him – after all, they'd just been in the very presence of God and yet had no need to fear because Jesus was with them, v7: "*Get up,*" *Jesus said. Don't be afraid.*"

The assurance of that mountain experience only grew after Jesus rose from the dead and they fully understood. Peter actually wrote specifically about this event in his second letter, saying: '*We didn't follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eye witnesses of His majesty. For he received honour and glory from God the Father when the voice came to Him from the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased."* We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with Him on the sacred mountain.' [2 Pet 1:16-18] It was a profoundly important event for Peter because it confirmed Jesus as the Suffering Servant and risen King.

And that's really where you and I find assurance too. Because Peter wrote his letter for us. As an eye witness, he says to us: '*...[Jesus] received honour and glory from God the Father when the voice came to Him from the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased."* We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with Him on the sacred mountain.' Peter means for us to be fully assured that Jesus is God's beloved, the Christ. Being fully persuaded that we should not hesitate to listen to Him in everything. And being completely confident in all that Jesus has accomplished for us by dying and rising.

PLAIN (v14-21)

- **Experience**

The small group – Jesus, Peter, James and John – now come down the mountain of transfiguration to the plain, the setting for the next episode. They meet a crowd including a very distressed man who pleads with Jesus on behalf of his son. We discover this boy suffers from seizure-like symptoms, but it's not merely a medical condition; Satan has control of this child and tries to kill him by burning him or drowning him. We also learn that the father asked Jesus' other disciples – perhaps the other 9 or perhaps some from Jesus' wider circle – to heal the boy but they couldn't do it. On hearing this, Jesus' is exasperated. Then he calls for the boy to be brought to Him, He rebukes the demon, and the child's completely healed. That was the experience on the plain. So what does it reveal?

- **Revelation**

Well, to begin with, we shouldn't miss how this episode reveals the true character of Satan and evil. Jesus has cast out evil from people before. Even His disciples have done this quite extensively on His behalf. But there seems to be a particularly strong manifestation of Satan's evil on this occasion – the unrelenting intent to kill a child – possibly the man's only child. Make no mistake, Satan's only desire – without exception – is to kill and destroy people. It's tempting to think of Satan like the villains – even the worst villains – we see in movies, who always have a redeeming feature. There's no redeeming feature with Satan. His character, intent and works are pure evil.

But this only serves to reveal how comprehensive *Jesus* is in the face of evil. Did you notice how effortlessly He heals the boy? He rebukes the demon and instantaneously the boy's restored. It's clear there's incredible power in Jesus – specifically, power to overcome evil. And it's equally clear there's no power in *people* to overcome evil. Presumably, this was the problem with the disciples – they tried to confront the evil themselves, as if the power was somehow intrinsic to them rather than the power of Jesus working through them. But that's like trying to smash a granite block with the little plastic hammer you get in a McDonald's Happy Meal versus the crushing demolition ball of Jesus swinging in to smash it to dust.

And therein lies the source of His exasperation in this episode. He just saw *faithlessness* – even in his own disciples who, of all people, should have known better how powerful and dependable He was. [The allusion to Exodus 32 here's unmistakable – God had just spoken with Moses on Mt Sinai from within a cloud, then Moses returned down the mountain to find the Israelites faithlessly worshipping a golden calf. In his exasperation Moses smashed the stone tablets God had written His commands on. Here again on the plain, the same faithlessness in God's *greater* servant.] Notice Jesus describes the people as 'unbelieving' and 'perverse'. They're unbelieving because they don't live like He's God's Son who can do anything. They're perverse because instead they live trusting in themselves or others to control life. That evil intent that was so obvious with the boy being thrown into the fireplace or the lake, actually has a much subtler manifestation too – the self-determination of human beings and their natural refusal to entrust themselves to God the Creator and His Son.

- **Assurance**

And that brings us to the assurance of this episode: which is the *unlimited* and *unfailing* capability of Jesus. You would have noticed the disciples confused by their inability to help the boy and asked Jesus privately to explain. Look at His response in v20: "*Because you have so little faith. I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.*" Jesus here picks up two proverbials from His day – the mustard seed as the proverbial 'tiny', and moving mountains as the proverbial 'impossible'. The disciples' inability betrays not small faith, but faithlessness. Because even the tiniest faith, rightly placed in Jesus, achieves incredible things. Why? Because of the immense capability of Jesus in whom the faith is placed. Did you know that every second the sun's core converts some of its mass into energy equivalent to 1 billion mega-ton hydrogen bombs or 1000 trillion tons of TNT. Now imagine this energy in the size of the sun, or this basketball, or even this pin head you can't even see from where you're sitting. The size is really irrelevant – because the immense power remains the same.

Brothers and sisters, the encouragement here is that because Jesus is so very powerful and so very capable, even the weakest confidence in Him can change us, change the world, or both. What an encouragement that is – and how liberating. It's not the size of faith, but the *capability of Jesus*. Matthew writes this for our benefit, that we may be fully assured of the supreme power that's in Jesus. What are you facing right now? Jesus is all-sufficient to sustain you. What needs to change in you? Jesus is fully able to work that transformation. What will the future hold? Jesus won't let it overcome you. What difference can you make to the world? In the hands of Jesus, anything's possible.

GALILEE AND CAPERNAUM (v22-27)

- **Experience**

Lastly we come to Galilee where Jesus explains, now for the third time, He must suffer and die. On hearing this the disciples' experience great grief (v23). The chapter then ends in the town of Capernaum where Peter's buttonholed by a tax collector on whether Jesus pays the temple tax. This becomes a teaching moment for Jesus, ending in the somewhat quirky miracle of no doubt a surprised Peter finding the required tax amount in the mouth of a fish.

- **Revelation**

So what does this all reveal? Well, I think it reveals the disciples' *confusion*. For a start, there's their grief in v23 when Jesus explains His death. At one level, this grief is totally understandable: they loved Jesus and were devoted to Him. But, it also underlines just how confused they were about His role as the Christ. They believed Him to be a King (Ps 2), but not a Suffering Servant (Is 42) who'd rise to life. The confusion then continues with Peter and the temple tax. That 2-drachma tax was a fee that adult Jewish males paid for upkeep of the temple. Peter's confusion isn't about the tax per se – it's about who Jesus is. You see, by affirming to the tax collector that of course Jesus pays the temple tax, it's as if Peter sees Jesus no differently to the average adult Jewish male. So Jesus presses Peter on this: *“What do you think, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth collect duty and taxes – from their own children or from others?”* Jesus' point, of course, is that He's not an average adult Jewish male; He's the Son of God. And nor is Peter an average adult Jewish male – because by association with Jesus, he too is part of God's family. As sons, they're not obliged to observe the temple tax. Yet, you'll notice Jesus doesn't wish to put any stumbling block in the way of His ministry. And so He pays the tax. Presumably this tension between Jesus having no obligation to pay, yet choosing to pay, is why the quirky fish miracle – it's as if He's paid without really having paid.

- **Assurance**

Now there's great assurance for Peter – and for us – in this episode. Because if you belong to Jesus, then you belong to God's family. You can just imagine Peter responding to the tax collector's question nervously or perhaps defensively that of course his master pays the tax. But there was no need for nervousness or defensiveness, because Jesus is the Son of God, and Peter was in the family. And it's the same for us. We don't earn our way into the family, nor do we err our way out of the family. There's no need for spiritual nervousness or spiritual defensiveness; if you belong to Jesus then you're adopted into His family and share in all the blessings, always. When I was growing up my mum owned a café, and I'd often go and visit the café for lunch. Whenever I did, I'd be offered whatever I wanted – a sandwich, a soft drink, maybe a slice of carrot cake. And never once did I need to pay. Never did I even think I would pay. For I was the son of the owner. The customers pay, but not the sons and daughters. I simply received the food as a gift – and hopefully thanked my mum! No nervousness, no defensiveness. Just knowing and appreciating that I was a part of the family. Brothers and sisters, be assured that when you belong to Jesus, you belong to God's family and you needn't be spiritually insecure in any way. You needn't try to earn your way with God. You needn't fear that you're not actually a family member. Connected to the Son, you're as secure as can be.

CONCLUSION

Let me conclude.

On the mountain the disciples had great fear in the presence of God – but friends, there's no need to fear when Jesus, the beloved Son of God, is with us. On the plain the disciples were faithless – but friends, put your confidence in Jesus and his infinite and unfailing power, not in yourself. And in Galilee the disciples were confused – but friends, remember that Jesus is the Son of God and when you belong to Him you belong to God and nothing can change that. Like the disciples we can be slow to learn about Jesus. And even if we have learned about Him we can be quick to forget. May we not tire of learning more of Jesus from accounts like this, so that we grow in our appreciation of Him, and hence grow in our assurance. Let's pray we do.

Reflection question

What more have you discovered about Jesus from Ch17? In what ways does it encourage and assure you?