

Matthew 17:1-23: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 08 March 2020

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Matthew chapter 17 verses 1 to 23 I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.

He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him.

When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, Rise and have no fear. And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.

And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead. And the disciples asked him, Then why did the scribes say that first Elijah must come?

He answered, Elijah does come, and he will restore all things. But I tell you that Elijah has already come. And they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased.

[1 : 30] So also the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands. Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist. And when they came to the crowd, a man came up to him, and kneeling before him said, Lord, have mercy on my son, for he has seizures, and he suffers terribly.

For often he falls into the fire, and often into the water. And I brought him to your disciples, and they could not heal him. And Jesus answered, O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you?

How long am I to bear with you? Bring him here to me. And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him, and the boy was healed instantly. Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, Why could we not cast it out?

He said to them, Because of your little faith. 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.

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.

[2 : 44] And they were greatly distressed. In Matthew 16 and 17, we've moved to a turning point in the narrative of the gospel. If baptism initiated the first phase of Jesus' ministry, the transfiguration initiates in part the second.

Jesus announced the kingdom at the beginning of his ministry, and now he announces his forthcoming death. A great shadow has come over the scene, and we are being prepared in these ominous statements for this great movement towards Jerusalem, at which Jesus will die.

In the final verse of chapter 16, Jesus declared that some of those standing there would not taste death until they saw the Son of Man coming in glory. The presence of this statement before the transfiguration is common to all of the synoptic gospels that record this event.

But yet, it does not seem to be a fulfilment of the statement in total. It would be strange to speak about some not tasting death before they saw this thing, when no one actually tasted death before some people saw that thing.

Rather, I think this is an anticipation of something that would be revealed more generally later on. What Peter, James and John are seeing here is a sneak preview, as some sort of trailer of what's going to happen in the future.

[4 : 03] In the book of 2 Peter, chapter 1, verse 16, Peter writes many years later, For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.

For when he received honour and glory from God, the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the majestic glory, this is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased, we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain.

And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you do well to pay attention, as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of scripture comes from someone's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God, as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

Now the problem that faced Peter when he was writing this letter was that many of the other apostles had died, many of those who were standing there here in Christ at the end of chapter 16 of Matthew had already passed on, and Jesus had said that he would do these things, that they would see the kingdom, before some of them had tasted death.

And it seems as if the clock is ticking. Peter is still alive, but he seems to be hastening towards death, and so somehow this promise has to be fulfilled. Now what Peter does at this point, I think helps us to understand the connection between the transfiguration and Jesus' earlier statement.

[5 : 38] He points to the events of the transfiguration, as it were a full dress rehearsal of this later revelation of Christ's glory, that they have seen Christ's glory on that mountain, and they know that it's there.

It's just a question of when it's going to be revealed to the world more generally. To understand the event that's being referred to here, we should go back to Daniel chapter 7, in verses 13 and 14, I believe that the event that Jesus refers to, I believe that the event that Jesus refers to, in saying that some will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom, I believe that's referring to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.

But this event of the transfiguration anticipates that later event. It's the revelation of the glory of the last Adam and the second man placed on the mountain.

There are a number of details here that should make us think back to the story of the Exodus, the appearance of God in that glorious theophany to Moses on Mount Sinai, where Moses' face shone in that transfigured glory.

But there's a difference between Moses and Jesus here. Moses went up on the mountain and his face shone, but his face shone with a reflecting glory. In the story of Christ going up on the mountain, the glory comes from Christ himself.

[7 : 17] The glory is not a reflected glory so much as Christ's own proper glory. On the Mount of Sinai, there is this glorious appearance of God in a theophany.

There is the plan given for the tabernacle. There is the gift of the law. And here, Peter wants to build tabernacles for Elijah, for Jesus, and for Moses.

There is also the establishment of the high priest and the glorious garments of the high priests.

Christ's garments shine with him. It's not just Christ, but it's his glorious garments.

Christ is being revealed as the glorious high priest on this mountain. And he's also being revealed as God's glorious revelation. As we look through the Old Testament, there are many stories where God appears in glory to his people, to his prophets, and to others.

We see it in the beginning of the book of Ezekiel. Saw the heavens opened and saw visions of God. And Ezekiel's description of the throne chariot vision of God is one in which we see this human-like figure, but the language is elusive, and it can't quite capture or describe what he is in fact seeing.

[8 : 27] We have descriptions of some features of this figure, but we never see the face. We never have a direct description. Same thing with the vision of Isaiah in the temple in chapter 6 of his prophecy.

In that chapter, the Lord is seen high and lifted up, the train of his robe filling the temple. Moses sees the back of God on the Mount of Sinai. In all of these cases, God is revealing his glory in the glorious angel of the covenant, perhaps, but no one sees the face completely.

I believe what we see in part here on the Mount of Transfiguration is the face of God's glorious theophanic presence being revealed. And as we read back through the Old Testament, we know who this person is.

When Moses sees the glory of God on the top of Mount Sinai, when Isaiah sees the glory of God filling the temple, when Ezekiel sees the throne chariot of the Lord, they're seeing Jesus.

They're seeing the Son in his glory. And in the book of John, this is particularly emphasized as he can speak about Isaiah's vision and say that Isaiah said this when he saw his glory, his referring to

Christ.

[9 : 47] And so this theophany, this event of the Mount of Transfiguration helps us to read Old Testament narrative, to understand that all these events in the Old Testament are events of the revelation of the glory of Christ.

But we only see that retrospectively. Once the face has been revealed, everything else is known. God gave the law to Moses on the top of Mount Sinai. And on the Mount of Transfiguration, God declares the gift of his law, the gift of his word in Christ.

This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him. As Hebrews chapter 1 declares, long ago at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets. But in these last days, he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature.

And he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

[10 : 59] And the Mount of Transfiguration is precisely a revelation of this truth. It's on the Mount of Transfiguration that we see that Christ is the great word of the Father. It's on the Mount of Transfiguration that we see that he is the radiance of the glory of God.

It's on the Mount of Transfiguration that we see that he's so much more superior to the angels. It's on the Mount of Transfiguration that we see that he is the one who fulfills all these revelations of God in the Old Testament.

He is the high priest. He is the one with the glorious garments. He is the one who will sit down on high once he has made atonement for sins. And as Christ reveals himself in these glorious high priestly garments on the Mount of Transfiguration, we begin to understand as he moves towards Jerusalem that he is not going to Jerusalem under compulsion.

He is not going to Jerusalem as one who is weak and forced by circumstance. But he is going to Jerusalem as the great high priest committed to completing his mission, committed to doing his great work and then sitting down at God's right hand, having completed it, having wrought atonement and deliverance for his people.

Moses and Elijah stand alongside him. Moses, the one who gave the law. Elijah, the one who is seen as this great prophet, the paradigmatic prophet. They're the great witnesses.

[12 : 17] They're the wilderness forerunners. Moses went before Joshua as Joshua entered into the land. Elijah went before Elisha as Elisha led this conquest in miracles and signs of the nation of Israel.

And Jesus is the one who goes and completes this great exodus work. He is the greater Joshua. He is the greater Elisha. He is the one who will lead his people into the truest and most complete rest.

And these forerunners in the wilderness prepare the way for him just as John the Baptist did. Jesus tells his disciples to keep the vision under wraps until after the resurrection.

There are things that can only be known properly in their proper time. The significance of the transfiguration only becomes apparent from the vantage point of the cross and resurrection. Until those times it might seem this vision of glory detached from suffering. A vision of glory that would nullify the importance of suffering at this point in Jesus' story.

[13 : 17] But the transfiguration and its association with Jesus' teaching concerning his future suffering, they cannot be separated. They belong together. To understand the transfiguration we need to see the suffering.

To understand the suffering we need to see the transfiguration. The disciples ask about their understanding of the future. They believe that Elijah was to come first.

And Jesus has been speaking about the resurrection and that seems to come at the end of all things. So what about Elijah that was to come? Jesus says that Elijah has come and they understand that it is John the Baptist.

John the Baptist is the one who came in the spirit and the power of Elijah as we see in the declaration of Gabriel to Zechariah in the temple. He's the one who dresses like Elijah.

He's the one who has the conflicts that remind us of Elijah with Herod and Herodias like Ahab and Jezebel. When Jesus reaches the bottom of the mountain he finds that his disciples have failed to

cast out a demon.

[14 : 17] Their failure in this regard maybe could recall the story of Moses descending down Mount Sinai and finding that in his absence Aaron had failed dismally.

He had given in to the people and they had built a golden calf. And that fashioning of the golden calf leads to great judgment upon the people. Now the failure of Jesus' disciples at this point is nowhere near the same magnitude.

But they are judged in a way that recalled the judgments of Moses upon the unfaithfulness of the people. O faithless and twisted generation how long am I to be with you?

This is the language of Deuteronomy chapter 32 verse 5 and 20. Jesus declares to them that if you have faith like a mustard seed it would be sufficient to tell a mountain to move from here to there. And that mustard seed maybe draws our mind back to chapter 13. The mustard seed is that smallest of all the seeds but it will grow into something great. The point here is not just the faith being small in and of itself it's the fact that that faith can grow.

[15 : 23] What does it mean that faith can move mountains? In the context of the eschatological visions of the Old Testament there are often mountains being moved. Mountains and hills being brought low and valleys being raised up.

In Jeremiah chapter 4 verse 23 to 25 I looked on the earth and behold it was without form and void and to the heavens and they had no light. I looked on the mountains and behold they were quaking and all the hills moved to and fro.

I looked and behold there was no man and all the birds of the air had fled. I looked and behold the fruitful land was a desert and all its cities were laid in ruins before the Lord before his fierce anger. In Zechariah chapter 14 verse 4 to 8 On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives that lies before Jerusalem on the east and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley so that one half of the mount shall move northward and the other half southward and you shall flee to the valley of my mountains for the valley of the mountains shall reach to Azal and you shall flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah the king of Judah then the Lord my God will come and all the holy ones with him on that day there shall be no light cold or frost and there shall be a unique day which is known to the Lord neither day nor night but at evening time there shall be light on that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem half of them to the eastern sea and half of them to the western sea it shall continue in summer as in winter and then finally in Revelation chapter 6 verse 12 to 14 when he opened the sixth seal

I looked and behold there was a great earthquake and the sun became black as sackcloth the full moon became like blood and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale the sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up and every mountain and island was removed from its place maybe what Jesus is referring to is this great event in which things will be moved and the whole order will be transformed at this culminating eschatological event in history and their faith will be part of that even if it may be like a small mustard seed now it can grow to a great tree and participate in that event in the future a question to consider looking from the vantage point of the mount of transfiguration it could be argued that the glory of Christ is the very centre of the story of scripture both Old and New Testament how would you make this case?