



## *The new*SHOFAR

*The Transfiguration of our Lord*

Daniel 7:9-14 - Matthew 17:1-9

### *Six days later...*

This time reference introducing the Transfiguration is clearly important for Matthew but its significance is not clear for readers today. It could refer to the six days of creation before the Day of Rest (the Sabbath) or perhaps the six days Moses had to wait on Mt Sinai before the *glory of the Lord* appeared. Or, it could be the six days the disciples had to wait after Jesus had insisted that discipleship requires the *taking up of one's cross*. It demands a laying down of the believer's life that Christ may reign in their words and deeds. After six days of trying to make sense of this (remember Peter had remonstrated with Jesus about his prophesy of the approaching death of the Son of Man) Jesus took them to the mountain top.

### **Jesus took them up a very high mountain**

While there are numerous examples of significant divine events taking place on biblical mountains, the one Matthew most likely has in mind is Mt Sinai, the mountain top on which Moses met with God to receive the ten commandments. The similarities between that account and the one here in Matthew are notable – God appears in a cloud, the six days, the three companions, the shining of the face and the ending of the narratives. Most important of all, both are revelations of God for a people *on a divine Way*. The Hebrew people are in the wilderness on the way to the Land of Milk and Honey and must endure many trials, temptations and failures before they reach their goal. Jesus and his band of disciples are on the Way to Jerusalem where Jesus will be crucified and his blood will initiate the new covenant between God and all men and women.

These disciples have already been presented with a terrifying vocation. They are to take Christ out to the world, a world filled with difficulties and opposition. But it is also a world in desperate need of the saving gifts God is offering to them. The disciples understand the problems and it must have been tempting to abandon their task or to forget “the world” and turn inwards to their own little faith community. But Jesus has already reminded them...*I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and ...the gates of Hell will not prevail against it.* The ministry of the disciples is the ministry the Father gave to his Son. Success for the disciples is guaranteed and even though it may come at the cost of their lives, the Kingdom will take hold and grow. The only impediment to the spread of the Gospel is believers.

### **And he was transfigured before them**

The descriptions of Jesus here are all about an incredible, powerful light that seemed to overtake the body of Jesus. Nowhere else (apart from perhaps the Risen Christ appearing in the darkness of Easter Sunday morning) is Jesus more obviously the Light of the World. We are told *he was transfigured in front of them*. That verb is especially chosen as it means he was changed from the inside. While it was his external, physical appearance that was changed in the eyes of the disciples, it was really more like a vision of the “interior” of Jesus. It is an insight into his true nature, being, personality and mission. What is “shining” out of Jesus is the inner life the Son has from his Father. It is the glory he had with his Father before the world was created. Importantly it is not a different Jesus. It is not a new Jesus, a Jesus to whom something new has been added by the Father. It is the Jesus who had been walking

around in Galilee and Judea, the area at the bottom of that mountain. The only new thing is how the disciples are now given an insight into an aspect of Jesus they had not yet witnessed.

### **What then is this all about?**

Matthew answers this question by recording the appearance of *Moses and Elijah* alongside Jesus. Their role is to highlight Jesus for the sake of the three disciples there with him. For the Jews, the great authorities for Judaism and the role of Israel in the wider world were Moses (the Law) and Elijah (representing the prophets). They looked back to these two key characters and built their lives around their teachings. They were the servants of God and the Law as handed on from them had the final say in the day to day life of the Jewish believers. They did look ahead to the One who was to come, the One who would bring to its fullness all God had been doing in the past. What they failed to see was how this man Jesus was the very One for whom they had been waiting.

This is what Matthew is saying through this vision of Moses and Elijah alongside Jesus. God had now brought their works to an end. In Jesus, all of the realities about which Moses and the prophets had spoken are now being fulfilled. It is this man from Galilee who is the full and final authoritative interpreter of the will of God. Jesus marks the end of the Law as the Jews had come to know it and follow it. There is a new way. The Jesus Way.

### **What might that mean for the Church?**

Peter (the one to whom the keys of heaven had been given) offers one response to this revelation of the true nature of Jesus. He wants to stay there, with the other two disciples and build some tents for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. The transfigured Jesus and the insights that came with it were so wonderful, so enriching and calming they wanted to forget about life at the bottom of the mountain. Life with its trials and struggles, evils and doubts. In this he is reflecting an ongoing temptation for every Church down through the ages, for you and for me. It is the idea that we can be comfortable turning inwards and forgetting about the world with all of the problems associated with sharing the Gospel with unbelievers. It is much easier to concentrate on our own “perfection” and wait until we are living in better times before we go out and engage with others. The trouble is we would never leave our “mountain tops”.

The point Matthew is making for his own Church, is how the gift of the transfiguration is a gift for mission. The only reason they could not see this inner glory of Jesus while he was with them walking around Judea was because they were spiritually blind. They saw in Jesus only what they wanted to see and were not ready to take on and believe in all that Jesus was bringing to them from God. The disciples saw Jesus as meeting their expectations and looked no further. They were happy to celebrate the blind seeing, the deaf hearing and the lame walking but did not see them as being signs of something far greater – salvation.

### **There is no them and us in the Kingdom**

If the disciples had the kind of faith that enabled them to find the fullness of Jesus down there at the bottom of the mountain, in the valleys of darkness and struggle, they would never have been paralyzed in fear and immobilized by uncertainty. They did not need to pray for God to “come to me”, for God was with them – in Jesus. The Feast of the Transfiguration is a celebration of ever-present-Christ in our world. This is the moment in the Gospel when Jesus begins to make preparations for the crucifixion and thus it serves as an encouragement to his followers. Even in his death and burial he remains with them and they remain in him. There is never an absence of Christ, a divine silence in the midst of darkness. The glory and power and divine light of Christ are there for all men and women of faith to see, to use, to take up and bring about a whole new perspective to the world in which we live. We do not need other powers and “ways” to prop us up when God seems quiet. Christ is with us. Waiting. Ready.

