

Sunday 15th February 2026, Eucharist

Exodus 24:12-end, 2 Peter 1:16-end, Matthew 17:1-9

Mother Emma

I was recently talking to someone who had just got back from a skiing trip and was still full of the excitement and awe inspired by time in the mountains. They talked about the sense of isolation and wild beauty, of separation from the frenetic existence of life in the population centres beneath, of an increased sense of spirituality and closeness to nature, even if we no longer share the Biblical flat-earth cosmology which believed that on a mountain top, one was quite literally closer to God in his Heaven. It seems likely that Matthew the Gospel-Writer shared this love and respect for mountain settings, over and above the spiritual connotations of his time, derived from the story of Moses and the mountaintop Law-Giving which we heard in our first reading.

Matthew's Gospel is built around no fewer than six mountain scenes, in each of which we learn more of the true nature of Christ. Because of the way in which the liturgical year and the lectionary use the Scriptures, we often hear these stories a little out of their Biblical order, which perhaps prevents us from seeing the development of Matthew's narrative, but it is well worth looking at the original, to reflect on how gradually Jesus revealed himself to his disciples and to the world.

The first of Matthew's mountain scenes forms part of the Temptation in the Wilderness, which is of course the text for the first Sunday of Lent – next Sunday. Here the Devil takes Jesus up a high mountain, and offers him power over all the kingdoms laid out before him, if only Jesus will fall down and worship him. At the risk of being a spoiler, I can reveal that Jesus, of course, passes this test with flying colours, insisting that only God is worthy of worship. We see that he is a man of honour and courage, but possibly at this stage, we might feel that there are others who have the strength to withstand the temptations of power – though we are well aware that many do not!

The second mountain provides the backdrop for the readings we shall be hearing and studying in our sermons over the summer – the Sermon on the Mount. Here Jesus is revealed as a holy man, a great teacher, someone who can understand and expound the Scriptures in a new and exciting way, setting out a vision for a world built upon God's values and inspiration. Yet, still here, many could regard him simply as a gifted prophet – and indeed, many today who feel unsure about the divinity of Christ, are happy to accept and to follow the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount.

However, by the third mountain scene, these perceptions are beginning to be challenged, as Jesus miraculously feeds five thousand people with five loaves and two fish. He is shown to be compassionate and nurturing, yet there is suddenly something more – a miraculous aspect which suggests an inexplicable aspect to his humanity. We see the disciples and

others beginning to question their assumption that they are simply following a great Teacher.

Our reading today deals with the fourth of Matthew's mountain scenes, and it is here that there is a sudden turning-point in the disciples' understanding and perception of Jesus. This scene is one full of mystery and wonder, with that appearance of the great figures of Israel's past, Moses and Elijah, representing the Law and the Prophets of the Old Testament; Jesus himself is miraculously transfigured, so that he shines with light like the sun, and those present distinctly hear the voice of God addressing him, claiming him as his own Son, and commanding them – and through them, all of us – to listen and to take seriously what Jesus has to say. In this scene, which takes place shortly before Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem, we are being prepared for the full glory which is to come, whilst Christ himself is being encouraged by Moses and Elijah, and by the Father himself, for what lies ahead of him.

It is for this reason that we hear always this reading just before the start of Lent; before we too begin the journey to the Cross, so that we can be inspired by Jesus' glory and true nature, as we prepare to walk with him through the suffering of Holy Week.

To complete the cycle, the fifth mountain is of course the Mount of Olives, where Jesus suffers and prays in the Garden of Gethsemane, as he waits for his arrest and all that is to follow. And on the final mountain, after the Resurrection, the risen Christ, now revealed in all his divine glory, makes everything clear by declaring: *'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations ... teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'* Gradually, through these key mountain scenes, we have watched as Jesus's divinity is revealed within his humanity, with that key turning-point on the Mount of the Transfiguration.

Yes, Jesus is a great Teacher; yes, he is a holy man who can interpret and bring alive the Scriptures for us in new ways, but he is more than that. God the Father claims him as his Son; he shines with the glory of the Heavens, revealing to us the glory that is promised to all who have faith; he is called to suffer for the salvation of a fallen world, and in his risen existence, he sets out the Great Commission by which Christians have sought to live ever since.

This Wednesday is Ash Wednesday and we hope and pray that as many of you as possible will gather to receive the sign of Christ's cross in ash on your foreheads, recalling our human frailty and mortality, but looking ahead, through the solemnity and penitence of Lent to the Easter revelation of the glory prefigured today in Jesus' Transfiguration.

Amen