

Sermon 19/02/23 St James

Matthew 17:1-9

This really is the wow moment to end all wow moments. Or alternatively it is a story so full of symbolism and coincidence that it is hard to believe. Except that it appears in Matthew's, Mark's and Luke's gospels with very much the same detail, and that makes it hard to dismiss as pure fiction.

It is a simple enough event. Jesus takes Peter, James and John up a hill. While they are there he becomes lit up in an unearthly way and is seen conversing with Moses and Elijah. Peter gets excited and blurts out the first thing that comes into his head. A cloud appears out of which they hear the voice of God. They come down the hill and Jesus tells them not to tell anyone.

So just how much do the parts of the incident reflect other Biblical passages.

Jesus takes Peter, James and John with him. This mirrors the future event at Gethsemane when he takes these three and goes aside to pray.

They go up a mountain, a secret place, just as Moses went up Mount Sinai and also was lit by God's glory.

Jesus is flanked by Moses and Elijah, who represent the high ideals of the law and the prophets, just as Jesus in contrast was flanked at the crucifixion by two criminals.

They heard God's voice as at Jesus' baptism – 'this is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased'.

Jesus tells the disciples not to be afraid – there are many examples of that, I immediately think of the shepherds frightened by the angels in the nativity story.

If you accept more tenuous links there are probably more. It does feel as though the telling is contrived to make it seem more holy, more full of happy coincidence. Perhaps the disciples chose to see and remember what they felt was expected of them.

The two things that successfully quash my cynicism are firstly, that this incident is reported in all of the first three gospels. I cannot believe that this would be the case if it was completely imagined, something happened even if in the telling it is a bit distorted and exaggerated. Secondly the way in which Peter suggests building three tents. That has the feel of a knee jerk reaction from someone desperate to say or do something, but isn't sure what that should be. It does not feel like part of a manufactured and polished story.

In suggesting the tents Peter is thinking of the Jewish festival of Tabernacles, when in remembrance of the time the Israelites spent wandering in the desert families built (and still build) special tents like the ones they would have lived in in the desert. In his confusion Peter is reverting to what he knows and feels comfortable with. How often do we do that?

Sometimes in our house there is a cry of, 'Bring out your dead!'. Not because I am into 14th century historical re-enactment, but because in my family it roughly translates into, 'I am about to wash up so bring your dirty stuff out because I won't be best pleased if it appears after I have thrown the water away.' It is only when nobody moves that I realise that this shout has no meaning outside of the Welsh part of my family.

How easy is it to find comfort in the familiar? To work on some sort of autopilot which allows us to do things without really thinking, without stretching ourselves. Exercise gurus recommend that we ring the changes as our bodies can get too familiar with one sort of exercise, health professionals

that we should keep our brains active with crosswords and the like. The same can be true of our spiritual life. Sometimes it needs to be enlivened with something different, that will stretch and challenge and allow us to grow in faith. One favourite of diocesan training courses is to get you to draw a map showing how your faith has changed. There are many different ways but often those maps show that the growth occurs when something forces a change, often something very challenging. This may be the time to have your spiritual work out and join one of our Lent groups or the quiet day later this spring.

There is Peter a little overwhelmed by what is happening, feeling that he must say something, in fact behaving just like we might do in the same situation. Peter, so ordinary, so impulsive, so full of good intentions. So himself. He may not have initiated many of those moments but by his faith he allowed himself to be drawn into the situations, and to enter fully into them, to try to walk on water, or to rush to join Jesus on the shore after the resurrection. That his courage sometimes failed him only makes it easier for us to identify with him, the denial of Jesus followed by the bitter weeping over his shortcomings. There was a great line in *Call the Midwife* the other night, one of the characters said something in a public meeting and later apologised to one of the others. As she accepted the apology 'It did hurt,' she said, 'but only because it was true'. How often is our frustration with others really frustration with ourselves?

Of course we are unlikely to experience 'wow' in the same way as Peter. But there is 'wow' around us every day, the wonder of nature, the friendliness of strangers, the generosity of God. Seeing an old friend with their small child after a string of painful miscarriages, or a community come together to support a family in trouble. It may be a situation rather than a person that shines in God's light.

Throughout the Gospel's Peter stands out as someone we can empathise with, someone who struggles not to be himself. Someone ordinary. But that did not stop Jesus identifying him as the person to lead his church. We may feel a bit ordinary, prone to saying the wrong thing at a bad time, but we are surrounded by the love of a God who wants us to be ourselves, and to share all the wow moments that he provides.