

'Transfiguration' – Matt 17: 1-9, 2 Pet 1:16-21 - (SJD) - 26/2/17

Have any of you been watching the new BBC series of the 'Real Marigold Hotel'? I don't particularly like celebrity based programmes but this, at least, is set against the backcloth of southern India. I recognise a lot of the places they visit. One of the things that struck me were the number of celebrities who had come on the trip to help 'find themselves'. They recounted how they were looking for some great mystical experience which would give their life meaning. Mystical experiences are not unknown in Christianity – indeed many are recorded in the Bible itself - Moses & burning bush, Abraham and the 3 'angel visitors', Jacob and his vision of a ladder to heaven, Ezekiel and Daniel & in NT Paul, John¹ and this story of the transfiguration. Indeed, like me, you may also have had such an experience some time in your life. So what can we learn from the transfiguration story about such events?

1. The Origin and Cause of such events

I grew up in the 60s when some, often prominent, people went seeking such experiences through hallucinogenic drugs like LSD. These drugs, like modern equivalents, mess with people's brains resulting in strange illusionary experiences. These were and still are very different from the mystical experiences described in the Bible. At no stage are Peter, James and John under any chemical influence – indeed we can see from Peter's reaction that although the experiences are completely unexpected, they remain 'normal' trying to make rational sense of what they see and hear. But there is also one other very important difference between these biblical stories and drug induced events or even those being sought by the celebrities in India. It seems to me that in all these biblical events it was not the individual seeking an experience of God but rather God, unexpectedly breaking in on their normal life in an extraordinary way. The event has both its origin and cause in God. It is never initiated by some wilful activity of the recipient. Put another way the transfiguration and all such Christian mystical events are driven by the activity of God not by any desire of man. Peter, James and John were not seeking the experience, God chose to bring it about.

But why then did God give PJ & J this experience?

I believe it is no coincidence that this experience comes immediately after Peter's great confession of who Jesus is.² Having made that step of faith it seems that God is now cementing that belief through this experience. We know that it certainly stayed with Peter all his life, as we read in the 2 Peter account. This was my experience too!

It is important to note therefore that in itself this experience did not create faith in God – rather it strengthened and supported an already existing faith. Those who go looking for a mystical experience to provide evidence for God will be sadly disappointed. Such events will not create faith when none is there. Remember how many Jews saw the miracles Jesus performed and still denied who Jesus was. However, sometimes, as in the case of Moses at the burning bush, God may use such an experience to give new direction to an existing faith. Think of the story of Cornelius, the Roman Centurion in Acts 10. He was given a vision to send to Joppa for Peter. When he does, Peter reveals the full truth of JC and Cornelius and all his family are baptised. BUT we need to remember that Cornelius was chosen by God for this revelation because he was '**devout and God-fearing, prayed to God regularly and gave generously to the poor.**'³ Faith was being exercised before the mystical experience even though faith was enhanced and developed

¹ See Exodus 3, Genesis 18, Genesis 28:10ff, Ezekiel 1, Daniel 7, Acts 9, Revelation 1:9ff.

² Matthew 16:16

³ Acts 10:2,4

through the experience itself. Primarily, the experience brought a greater understanding of who Jesus was and what he had done for Cornelius and his family. I believe God continues to give such experiences to Christians at key times in their lives – either to reinforce a step of faith or sometimes to initiate a new direction God wants us to take. BUT as with Moses, Cornelius and others we still have a free choice whether to follow or ignore the experience.

2. But what about Jesus? He surely didn't need his faith enhanced or the direction of his life changed?

That is true, though we are unclear about what Jesus was discussing with Elijah and Moses. But perhaps we can see something else of importance here. Peter, James and John were used to Jesus disappearing in order to pray and spend time with God, His Father. Jesus deliberately took time out from the busyness of his ministering life to retreat to somewhere quiet. Mark 1:35 tells us that, ***'In the morning, long before dawn, (Jesus) got up and left the house and went off to a lonely place and prayed'***. Following the feeding of the 5000, we are told that Jesus withdrew to hills alone while his disciples set off to row across the lake. This seems to be the pattern of Jesus' life. He even made a special point of retreating to be with his Father before significant events, like choosing his disciples and, on the Mt of Olives, the night before his crucifixion. For him it appears to be an important discipline to meet with his Father. This episode, then can be thought of as just one more such event, albeit a little different in that 3 of the disciples were also present. Jesus initiated the retreat by taking Pj & J up a high mountain.⁴

For many Christians down the centuries, mystical experiences sometimes came about as a result of their habit of spending time alone with God. The vision of St John the Divine recorded in the book of Revelation, occurred on the Lord's Day when John was in prayer.⁵ At such times God sometimes allowed them a mystical experience of Himself. It seems that a clear message is that ***'we can best advance by retreating'***. What I mean by that is that when we regularly step out of the busyness and routine of our lives to meet with God then we will hear from him and gain His perspective and power to equip us in those tasks set before us. God may even choose to give us a mystical experience to help guide and direct us, though such an experience is never guaranteed.

But if the transfiguration challenges us about our lives now, it also gives us a glimpse of our future. The transfiguration reveals God in Jesus Christ. The Greek term used is **metamorphosis**, which means a change of form – namely his appearance or shape. This change of form revealed his underlying substance – his divinity. But it did not remove his human nature. He still clearly possessed all the 'human' physical characteristics he had before – he remained recognisable to Peter, James and John. Jesus showed how divinity and humanity can co-exist in an individual – something denied by other religious groups and Christian sects. Why was Jesus transfigured? Clearly it wasn't to fulfil his mission to the Cross. Rather it was to give Peter, James & John a glimpse of the life to come once Jesus' had made his sacrifice for our sins. This is the gist of what Peter wrote in our Epistle. Jesus gives them and us a glimpse of what we will become – a foretaste of our inheritance in heaven. As one writer puts it: ***'Christians are pilgrims on earth, heading for Heaven, and whatever blessings we may enjoy here and now, they are no substitute for what is to come in eternity'***.⁶

In conclusion we can see that mystical experiences from God enhance an existing faith, they don't create faith where none is present. We have seen how they can also be understood as part of a natural process of

⁴ Matthew 17:1

⁵ Revelation 1:10

⁶ Bray, G.(1998) 'Steps of Understanding' Christian Focus p. 63

drawing closer to God while they also give us a glimpse into our promised future in Christ. Mystical experiences should not be sought but if experienced the test of their God givenness is that they will enhance both our existing faith in God and probably give direction to our life of service. Amen