

The turning point

Readings: Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14; Luke 9: 18-20, 28b-36

Question for congregation: Who is Jesus to you and what is his point?

The transfiguration is something that we don't often talk about in the Western church. Maybe because of the surface it doesn't have readily applicable lessons for our life. Or maybe it's just because it's weird. I mean it's not every day that you find your boss glowing brightly while talking to two dead guys and I'm not sure how I would react in that situation. But what I'm interested in is Peter's response to all of this. As we know, Peter is characteristically known for not always thinking before he speaks and just being a screw-up in general, which is probably the reason why he's the most relatable disciple. In this case he responds by asking if he should build a tent each for Jesus, Elijah, and Moses. Which would seem to us a pretty reasonable and considerate thing to ask. After all, Elijah and Moses might have travelled a long way and who knows how many steps there are in the stairway to Heaven? Maybe they want to rest their feet for a while. But the Bible says that Peter did not know what he was saying. And I would suggest there are two reasons why.

To understand why we need to jump back to a bit earlier in the chapter to verses 18-20 when Jesus asks his disciples who people say he is. His disciples answered "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and some say that you are one of the ancient prophets." And Jesus asks them "But who do you say I am?" And in a moment of clarity Peter climatically answers "The Messiah of God".

But this is another case of Peter not quite understanding what he was saying. For the term "Messiah" was very loaded and to understand this you have to know the historical context of Judaism in first century Palestine. What is often referred to as "Second Temple Judaism" was the result of the traumatic exile the Jewish people had faced centuries beforehand. If you are familiar with the writings of the Old Testament prophets you'll know that God exiled the Israelites from the Promised Land because they turned away from worshipping God and they were oppressing and abusing others. However, they would not be exiled forever as they would come back to the land but as subjects of a foreign power. In first century Palestine this was the Roman Empire. And so when they spoke of awaiting a Messiah they were expecting a political revolutionary that would overthrow the Romans and return Israel to statehood. He would take his rightful place and fulfil the Davidic covenant in which David's kingdom will have no end. And this is probably what Peter had in mind when he declared that Jesus was Messiah. After all, at the transfiguration he tries to make the experience of the glory of Jesus permanent by building dwelling places.

But this isn't really what Jesus has in mind. Firstly in his teachings he doesn't seem to care in the least about nationalistic desires. If anything, he will fulfil the Davidic covenant by building a spiritual kingdom that will stretch across the world and embrace people of all cultures. Secondly, he's very clear that his glory will be in his death by crucifixion. In fact his death and departure is the very thing he is discussing with Moses and Elijah when the disciples realise what is happening. But throughout the gospels you get this sense that the disciples don't want to let go of the hope of being made into a mighty nation again. And we may not be so different from the disciples here.

In the past two weeks one of my favourite theologians, Benjamin L. Corey, wrote two articles that ruffled a few feathers. The first was titled “10 Ways to determine if Your Christianity has been “Americanized””¹ In it he lists the following red flags:

1. If you look at the early Christians and are in disbelief over what you find.
2. Your chief concern with Muslims is how to defeat them instead of how to show them the love of Christ.
3. If you can recite more of the US Constitution and Bill of Rights than you can the Sermon on the Mount.
4. If you’re going to spend more time focused on the presidential election than serving real people around you.
5. If you advocate cutting government programs for the poor but don’t actually give to charity yourself.
6. If you say “we’re a nation of laws” in reference to immigrants faster than you can quote what the Bible states about immigrants.
7. If you think Paul’s prohibition on female teachers is straightforward, but Jesus’ teachings on enemy love is somehow open to a thousand degrees of nuance.
8. If you see only sexuality in the admonition to be modest.
9. If you think defeating gay marriage is the most pressing issue of our time when 750 million people around the world don’t have access to clean drinking water and 805 million people are chronically malnourished.
10. If your church honours soldiers more than the elderly woman who has been quietly teaching Sunday school for 30 years.

Needless to say, this article did not go down well with some people but I think he has some good points. Like it or not, our view of Jesus is going to be shaped by our culture. For example, I hate to break it to you but Jesus probably wasn’t a beautiful white man like Jim Caviezel. He was, after all, a first century Palestinian Jew. But there are other ways in which culture affects our view of Jesus. If you are from an individualistic Western culture, like us, you will probably talk about Jesus as your personal Lord and Saviour. If you come from a communal culture you will probably speak of what Jesus has done for your community. If you are from a Western country you will probably see Jesus’ work on the cross as something that takes away your guilt, whereas if you come from an Eastern country you’ll probably view it as taking away your shame.² And you may even take on ideas that have nothing in common with the biblical Jesus.

To take an extreme example, in the 19th and 20th centuries German thinkers sought to re-write Jesus altogether. Some viewed Jesus as being a religious Buddhist, Hindu, or Zoroastrian, either of which would make him an Aryan. At the beginning of the 20th century Buddha had replaced Socrates as the darling of the intellectual elite, and many sought to link Jesus’ teachings with Buddhist teachings. Others rewrote history so as to create a version of history where first century Galilee had actually

¹ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/formerlyfundie/americanized-christianity/>

² “Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament & Contemporary Contexts” by Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker has an interesting chapter exploring understandings of the Gospel in Asian cultures.

been populated by Assyrians, meaning that Jesus was an Assyrian and not a Jew. Some even insisted that the father of Jesus was a Roman soldier named Panthera. Others sought to identify Jesus with Teutonic myths. Jesus' teachings were rewritten to make him more masculine and embodying of German nationalistic ideals. Swastikas flanked crosses on church altars. If Hitler really was a Christian as some people have claimed, it was certainly an unconventional Christianity.³

And this is why we talk about the Christ above culture. Jesus confronts all cultures, even the cultures of "Christian nations". And in turn he challenges us whether we are politically conservative or liberal. We are after-all citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven first, New Zealand second. The Treaty of Waitangi may be the founding constitution of New Zealand but the Sermon on the Mount is the founding constitution of the Kingdom of God.

The second way in which Peter misses the point is a bit more subtle. Each of the three main figures in the transfiguration contains a deep symbolism behind them. Moses represents the Law of Moses, the basis of the old covenant. Elijah represents the prophets – those figures who called for Israel to turn back to God and towards justice and compassion. And Jesus represents the Messiah – the one who is God and is sent by God to liberate humanity. By building three tents Peter wants to set them on equal footing with each other. But God has a different idea. Suddenly they're surrounded by a cloud, a reoccurring sign in the Bible of the presence of God, and a voice from the heavens cries out, "This is my Son, my Chosen one, listen to him!" And Elijah and Moses are no longer with Jesus.

Jesus stands above the Law and the prophets. Now that's not to say that these are of no value. The Church has long held that discarding the Old Testament is heresy and I would be the last person to argue against that. But rather, the Law and the prophets point to Jesus. Just as Moses was the mediator of the old covenant Jesus stands as the mediator of the new covenant. And like the prophets Jesus calls us to return to God and live a life of love and compassion for others, but he also demonstrates what that looks like. And this is why a voice from the heavens cries out "listen to him".

The transfiguration is primarily asking "who is Jesus and what his point?"

And this is where we can fall into another adventure in missing the point. There's a particular term of Christianese, the jargon we church-folk use, which I have to admit I dislike: Bible-believing church/Christian. To explain why I'm going to refer back to the theologian I mentioned earlier, Benjamin L. Corey. A major reference point for his practical theology is Christ's Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew 5-9 and he's found that people are surprisingly resistant to it because a lot of it is just counter-intuitive in today's world. And often mention of the teachings of Jesus that are harder to follow is met with the protest "but I believe in the WHOLE Bible". Corey explains,

"I'll admit, it sounds good on the surface, but here's what it really means: it means, "I don't particularly care for what Jesus said in this passage, but I do know of one from the Old Testament which would contradict that, so I'll go with the Old Testament."

³ This paragraph was taken from a two-part blog entry I once wrote called "Jesus Wasn't a Conservative (but He Wasn't a Liberal Either)" <http://thoughtinflux.blogspot.co.nz/2014/06/jesus-wasnt-conservative-but-he-wasnt.html>

I've heard it expressed a little more directly at times. "Yes, Jesus did say to love your enemies, but Jesus is the SAME God who commanded we slaughter the Canaanite babies, so certainly he didn't mean we can't kill our enemies. I'm going to go ahead and believe the WHOLE Bible, thanks."

And you can actually see this thinking in the Bible. For there was a group of people who prided themselves on being very devout Bible believers. Some of them could even recite from memory the first five books of the Bible, which is a lot more impressive than my ability to say "I dunno, somewhere in Leviticus" when people ask me for a Bible reference. These people were called Pharisees. And for all their knowledge of the Law and the prophets they completely missed the point of scripture when he was quite literally staring them in the face. Instead they devised clever questions about scripture in an attempt to trap him and subvert his teachings. And time and time again Jesus exposes that their interactions with him are adventures in missing the point.

But there was another group of Bible believers that constantly missed the point. Yet they were viewed much more favourably by Jesus. They were his disciples. They were often characterised by petty bickering, group politics, doubts, fear, cowardness, and sometimes just plain dumbness. Yet they were also committed to following the Jesus who walked amongst them and taught them what the point of scripture was. So although they had many adventures in missing the point, they also had many turning points as Jesus prepared them for their mission.

And the Jesus we meet in scripture wants to do the same with us. He wants to turn our adventures in missing the point into turning points. Earlier I said that the scriptures point to Jesus. Well Jesus also points to the scriptures. When we orient our faith on the teachings and example of the Jesus we find in the gospels we will then begin to see the point of the rest of scripture and how to apply it in a Christ-like way. And this is why I don't think we should define ourselves primarily as Bible-believing Christians; rather our primary posture should be that of Christ-centred believers who understand the rest of the Bible through the example and work of Christ.

And it won't be easy. I was recently talking to another youth pastor and I admitted that when I read "love your enemies" part of me thinks "Do I have to? It's so hard". Jesus certainly has a lot of work to do with me. The alternative of operating on our default settings may be more attractive in the short run but it is ultimately destructive. The late great humanist David Foster Wallace once said "the so-called real world will not discourage you from operating on your default settings, because the so-called real world of men and money and power hums merrily along in a pool of fear and anger and frustration and craving and worship of self."⁴

Jesus' teachings are a turning point for human nature. To us they may seem very counter-initiative compared to what we're conditioned to think and do. But if he came to save us from ourselves I think that might just be the point.

⁴ This quote is from his speech (later adapted into a book) "This is Water: Some Thoughts Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life." The full speech can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PhhC_N6Bm_s