

COMMENTARY ON MATTHEW 17:1-9

Like the baptismal story this is a symbolic narrative which celebrates that in Jesus heaven and earth intersect. We might find other ways of saying this. In him God and humanity come together. Turning the imagery upside down: in him surfaces the depth of life, the divine reality. However we express it, the scene recalls the baptism, especially in Matthew, where both are public events (in Mark the baptism is not).

Not only the voice from the cloud and its word, but also the context of the story connect with the baptism. Chapter 16 had just reported Jesus' role as judge to come, who would judge all according to their performance, a theme also in context of the baptism in Matthew. It also speaks of his coming and of the kingdom, themes present in the baptismal context. And if we look further, there is even a connection between the suffering which is announced in 16:21 and Jesus' insistence of doing God's will in the baptism scene and being recognized for it by God in the words from heaven.

Some have speculated that the transfiguration story may be an Easter vision read back into the ministry of Jesus. If anything, it appears coloured more by imagery which pertains to the climax history, when Moses and Elijah were expected to reappear. Transfiguration is what Paul is talking about in I Corinthians 15 when he proclaims that we shall be changed in the twinkling of an eye at the last trump. The same applies to the glistening white, even more striking in Matthew, and echoing the prediction of Daniel 12 that the righteous will shine like stars in the sky. Matthew uses such imagery also in the interpretation of the parable of the wheat and weeds (13:43). In other words, the scene is painted in colours drawn from visions of the eschaton (Armageddon). The vision portrays in advance what will be seen when the kingdom comes.

There is an interesting interplay between the prediction in 16:29 about people standing with Jesus who will see the coming of the kingdom and what they see here. The real thing has yet to appear, yet this advance showing is reassuring of its reality. It is also more than that because it is saying something about Jesus' significance in the present.

Mountains are important in Matthew as places which symbolically bring us close to heaven, but also recall Old Testament pictures of Sinai as the place of revelation and Zion as the place of hope and instruction. There is a sense in which imagery of the end of time, such as brightness, exist because the end is seen as a time when what exists in heaven becomes visible. So if you come close to heaven, its radiance will have an impact already now. Thus Moses' face shone and, as an echo of this, Jesus' face shines. Links with Moses are important for Matthew, because Jesus stands in continuity with the Law and the prophets (as 5:17-19 and 7:12, and already the birth narratives, make clear). He has not come to replace Moses but to bring the authoritative interpretation of the Law given then and of God's will in the present. So, here, he reverses Mark's description which subordinates Moses to Elijah. Instead of Elijah with Moses (as in Mark) we read Moses and Elijah. As in Mark, hearers would have these figures in their memories from the disciples' reports about who people thought Jesus was (16:14). The strong emphasis on continuity in Matthew makes it likely that they also represent Israel's tradition of the Law and the Prophets.

The motif of making dwellings is without the censure it receives in Mark: Peter was a bumbling fool, again, not knowing what to say. Matthew is kinder because Peter does represent the church and has just been authorized as such in Matthew's additions to the Caesarea Philippi episode (16:13-20). Such dwellings echo the practices of the feast of booths and the tents of the wilderness. It may evoke the image for us to people wanting to build buildings or, more generally of wanting to hold onto experiences. The response from heaven turns these human responses into a distraction. The real call is to hear who Jesus is and to 'listen to him'. These words may be echoing the prophecy about the prophet to come after Moses, reported in Deut 18: 15-18, which include the same exhortation: 'listen to him'. This may be even more likely in Matthew, who is keen on echoes of Moses in his portrait of Jesus.

In Matthew the disciples express an appropriate response of reverence and awe at these words. In Mark they had a response of fear and apparent confusion at the appearance and this had led to their inappropriate suggestion. The voice from heaven then follows, the cloud disappears, and they see only Jesus. It is all rather stark and they do not come out of the scene well. By contrast in Matthew's Jesus' response to their being overwhelmed is to approach and touch them, encouraging them to rise and not to be afraid.

What Matthew has done to the story should not be seen as secondary and therefore second rate beside Mark. Mark has also been shaping his tradition. This is symbolic narrative, created to say something. In Matthew's case we have a beautiful image of human beings awed by the divine, but encouraged to stand on their feet and not to fear. It is a moment of profound grace. The meaning of grace we might, indeed, define as the invitation to stand up and not to fear (echoes of I John 4:17-18 on relating to God: 'There is no fear in love; for perfect love casts out fear'). It is to be lifted out of our inadequacy and smallness.

Our smallness may be linked to sin and guilt, but we should note that this is not always the case and it is not the case here. It may be that sense of shame about our being, whose roots perhaps precede guilt it may be just an overwhelming sense of awe. These responses must never be exploited to retain power as if only a certain elite, clergy or new found guru models, can release us and live from this importance. This grace is free. The touching of heaven and earth in the scene is like the touching of the disciples by Jesus.

Nor should the image of Jesus who becomes the only one whom they see (17:9) become a symbol of such abuse of power. We must not imagine a Jesus gluttonous for adoration or a god behind him equally representative of the will to power. This is the Jesus who leads us on and out into love and service, self-giving for others. The predictions of his suffering as Son of Man are only a few verses away in 16:21 and the verses which immediately follow (17:14-18) keep our feet on the ground: Jesus responds to the disciples' question about Elijah's coming by cryptically alluding to John's execution and his own impending passion.