

Sermon: Transfiguration on the Mountain  
Exodus 24:12-18; Matthew 17:1-9  
Rev Dr Jos M Strengholt

Intro

What is true spirituality? How can we be spiritually transformed?  
Mankind has as long as it exists, been seeking to know the one who made this world.

Can we have a true vision of God? No, I do not think we can. He is God!  
But at the same time: Yes! I believe we can.

## **1 The fire**

I do not doubt the historicity of that moment in the life of Jesus, when on a high mountain he was transfigured before the eyes of his disciples. Peter, James and John were eyewitnesses; Peter even referred to it in the letter that he wrote decades later. It was an unforgettable event.

He writes, 'We were eyewitnesses of his majesty [...] when we were with him on the sacred mountain...' Peter stresses, "It really happened... I saw it with my own eyes."

But it seems also clear that the Gospel writers did his best to describe the event in such a way, that it really matched a similar event in the Old Testament, namely, when Moses went up the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments.

When we listen to these two stories, the first thing that strikes us are the similarities. It seems that Jesus is presented to us as the new Moses. But look a bit more careful, and we also see subtle but very clear differences. Jesus is presented to us as one much more important than Moses.

In the Old Testament event, the Lord said to Moses, 'come up to me on the mountain...'

Just as it is Jesus who said to his disciples, 'Come up with me on the mountain'. Where in the Old Testament God took the initiative, in the New Testament, we read specifically that Jesus takes the initiative. Why does Matthew mention this? What is he trying to say?

Is he going beyond the superficial comparison of Jesus and Moses, to say: the real equation is the one of God and Jesus?

This is, I think, the message of Matthew.

The event occurred six days after Peter had confessed that Jesus is the Son of the Living God. And Jesus confirmed this by own his actions: Just as God called Moses up on the Mountain, so Jesus now calls his followers up on the mountain.

What then happens is amazing.

In Exodus we have read that the Glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and this appearance of the Glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire.

This devouring fire is also seen when Jesus takes his disciples up on the mountain. But Jesus himself was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun and his clothes became dazzling white. Jesus himself became like a devouring fire, like the sun.

Jesus is presented to us here - not as just a better Moses - He is presented to us here as the Glory of God - that is, the expression of the Majesty of God himself.

That is why Peter later in his letter writes that they saw Jesus' majesty. And John, who was also present, writes, when speaking of Jesus Christ: we have seen the glory of the One and Only.

And James, who was also present? He was so convinced of the Majesty of Jesus Christ, that he was prepared to bravely lead the very early church and he was killed by the sword by King Herod. He had seen the truth with his own eyes and was prepared to die for it.

## **2 The cloud**

Both stories also speak of a cloud that covered the mountain, and this cloud also signified the glory of God. Remember how in the exodus trip of Israel through the desert, God went before them by day as a cloud, and by night, as a fire.

The cloud in the story of Moses, was the cloud that made God invisible to the people. How can we even think of seeing the invisible God, the very idea is sacrilege. If we would be able to see God in his essence, he becomes measurable. He becomes tangible. Impossible of course.

So Moses never saw God, even though he desired to see God.

The Church Father Gregory of Nyssa wrote a very beautiful small book on the Life of Moses. In this book he describes the search of Moses for knowing God and for spiritual growth.

He uses the story of Moses as an allegory for the spiritual life. Moses meets with God in the cloud, Gregory writes, 'where Moses realises that God in his essence cannot be seen by the eyes and that God cannot be known by the mind either. Vision of God, comprehension of God, is impossible.'

Moses cannot see God, the people cannot see God; he is hidden from their eyes. God in his essence cannot be known by anyone; that was the significance of the dark cloud Moses had to enter into, on the top of the mountain. It made clear that God - invisible, holy, unlimited - is far beyond comprehension by us mortals.

In the case of the Transfiguration of Jesus, his glory was fully visible to Peter, John and James. The glory of God was not hidden from their eyes. They saw, as it were, the limit, the maximum, of God's self-revelation to humankind. Jesus himself.

We can never know God - in his essence, in his true nature - but we can know God in as far as He reveals himself to us in human terms and here we have it in front of us: this self-revelation of God, is Jesus Christ himself. God who became man.

Peter was totally confused and said some very dumb things when he saw Jesus talk with an appearance of Moses and Elijah. And in order to cut Peter short and stop his rambling, a cloud appeared.

In the case of Moses, the cloud was dark. Interestingly, now the cloud is bright, as if to underline that in the story of Moses, the focus was more on hiding, and now, when Jesus appeared, the focus was more on revelation.

This is even clearer when we then see that the voice of God speaks from the cloud - this is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased!

John in his Gospel concluded, "No one has ever seen God, but God, the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made Him known."

Let me repeat that: "No one has ever seen God, but God, the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made Him known."

There is really no comparison between Moses and Jesus. Moses was a mere prophet; while Jesus came from God himself.

That is why John in his Gospel underlines, "The law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus."

The idea that Jesus is just one of many prophets is strongly denied by those who knew him. Prophets can give us rules to live by; God himself gives us grace and truth.

That was of course not understood initially by Peter. He saw Moses and Elijah, and put them in the same category as Jesus: 'Let us build three tents'.

Jesus is incomparable to Buddha or Muhamed or Marx or Moses. Prophets can speak incredibly wise words - but none of them comes straight from God himself. Jesus only.

### **3 How should we respond**

So how to respond to this event on the mountain, to this glorious show of Jesus' Majesty?

When Peter rambles on, God interrupts him and says, Peter, you shut up... Don;t you get the point? This is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased. LISTEN TO HIM.

When it comes to knowing about God, about truth, about the grace of God for us, if your desire to know God, stop listening to the wrong voices. Listen to Jesus only. That is where you get a true vision of God, and the only one, because God chose to reveal himself through Jesus Christ his Son.

Do not tire yourself with philosophical questions about the essence of God; He is hidden from our sight and understanding. Gregory of Nyssa's advice to the man or the woman who wants to be a truly spiritual person: 'He should believe that the Divine exists, and he should not examine it with respect to... [its] mode of being... since that is unattainable.'

But true knowledge of God, not of his essence but at least of his characteristics and actions, can be attained by looking at our Lord Jesus Christ. In Him God revealed himself. In Him we meet the heart of God.

When Moses came down from the mountain, he gave the people the words of God - the Ten Commandments. That was his great accomplishment- a great blessing from God for us. Thanks to Moses we know how God wants us to live - and the will of God gives us of course a glimpse of who God is - though we remain very much in darkness.

Like Moses, Jesus also speaks words to us. The voice of God from heaven says: 'Listen to Him!' That means, above anyone we listen to, listen to Jesus Christ. Let his words be the criterion for understanding all other words. His words lead us to God.

But Jesus does not just speak; He is the living word of God; He himself is the revelation of the will of God and yes, of God himself. He makes God known to us by the totality of his being - words and deeds.

And when Jesus descended from the mountain, He accomplished the true exodus, of an entirely different quality than the exodus of Moses: Jesus accomplished the true liberation of humankind. He went down the mountain and told his disciples to not speak to anyone of this vision they had had of Jesus as God himself, until he would have been raised from the dead.

Dead? We just saw Jesus in his Glory! Death seems so wrong when we speak of God!

Yes: from now on, the course was set - to Calvary. By his suffering and death and resurrection the Majestic Jesus not only proved that finally God had been satisfied with his perfect servant; God was satisfied with Him, *and with all who belong to him.*

## **Conclusion**

The coming Wednesday is Ash Wednesday; we begin the season of Lent that leads us to Easter. The glorious Lord of the Transformation went to another mountain, of Calvary.

Many Christians worldwide decide to focus during this season on contemplation and worship of our Lord, by spending more time in prayer, and less time with food and drinks or other distractions.

I know people who go offline; they do not use facebook. Or they decide some other form of fasting, like no coffee, or no chocolate; or to just eat much less than they would do otherwise. Let us as a community also participate in this worldwide month of looking for God in a way that works for you personally.

Please come on Wednesday, with your kids, to begin the season in which we focus on the greatness of God, and on our need for salvation.

Our proper response to the vision of the Transfiguration is to be amazed at the Majesty and glory of our Lord; if we desire to know God, here is the answer. In Jesus Christ we find Him.

Our response is also to live by the whole Word of God; Old Testament and New Testament. And to listen carefully to Jesus Christ; His Words are our yardstick for understanding all of what God has said. Listen to HIM.

This King of Glory, this Majestic Son of God - he hid his true identity for a while, and he suffered and died; mankind showed itself wicked to kill him and mankind proved perfectly well that God is justified in rejecting us. Looking at Him provides a true image of who we are; imperfect and unholy. Penance is our proper response.

Let us use this season for spending extra time for looking at Him and at ourselves. How can we know Him more? How can we listen better? How can we follow Him more obediently?

Amen.