

February 23, 2020 Transfiguration of the Lord

“Jesus is transformed” Matthew 17:1—8

There are so many voices competing for our attention these days. That’s especially true whenever we’re coming up to an election. It seems that everybody who’s running for just about any office has a commercial on TV these days. And pardon me for saying so, but it’s my impression that many of them are engaged in a competition to outdo each other in promoting the very opposite of what we’ve been hearing from the Scripture lessons. Instead of the generosity, kindness, and compassion that the Bible calls us to practice toward all people, we hear things that seem to reflect indifference toward others, and even at times outright hostility.

But that is not the way of life we’ve been learning about. We’ve heard that what God desires of us is to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God. We’re to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke and so live as light for the world. We’re called to loving the LORD our God, which means walking in his ways, and observing his commandments. And Jesus took those commandments and made them about what goes on in our hearts, not just our outward actions. And as we learned last week that when it comes to loving our neighbors the Scriptures are very specific and all-inclusive. They measure the quality of our faith by how we treat the weakest members of society.

And so, we have come full circle during the Season of Epiphany. We began with Jesus’ Baptism, which demonstrated his commitment to carry out the role of the servant of the Lord. He was intent on fulfilling all righteousness, which means that he was going to set about God’s work of righting the wrongs and lifting the burdens from the oppressed.

In a word, he was going to see that God's justice is done. And as we pointed out then, God's justice means that the hungry are fed, the prisoners are set free, the blind receive their sight, those who are bowed down are lifted up, and the widows and orphans and the immigrants have someone to watch over them.

In a very real sense, I think we could look at all of Jesus' life in the light of that commitment to God's justice. Our Scripture lesson from Psalm 99: Here the Word of God:

1The Lord is king; let the peoples tremble! He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake!

2The Lord is great in Zion; he is exalted over all the peoples.

3Let them praise your great and awesome name. Holy is he!

4Mighty King, lover of justice, you have established equity; you have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob.

5Extol the Lord our God; worship at his footstool. Holy is he!

6Moses and Aaron were among his priests, Samuel also was among those who called on his name. They cried to the Lord, and he answered them.

7He spoke to them in the pillar of cloud; they kept his decrees, and the statutes that he gave them.

8O Lord our God, you answered them; you were a forgiving God to them, but an avenger of their wrongdoings.

9Extol the Lord our God, and worship at his holy mountain; for the Lord our God is holy.

Psalms 99 tells us that the kind of justice we've been talking about, the fairness that makes it possible for all people to thrive equally, is something that God has established. And so it should come as no surprise that Jesus set about establishing God's justice. Seeing that God's justice is done could very well have been a "mission statement" for Jesus. Except that in Jesus' case, he was one who determined to see that justice is done everywhere. And the way he established this justice was not simply by his own life. He called those of us who would follow him to see that justice is done for everyone, everywhere.

As at Jesus' baptism, so at his Transfiguration, there is a heavenly voice that confirms his commitment to carry out this role. I believe this is one of the important outcomes the Transfiguration was intended to accomplish: to convey to Jesus' closest disciples that he was indeed carrying out God's justice, and that they were to hear him.

The transfiguration of Jesus anticipates his glorification and as such, anticipates the glorious outcome for those who travel with him. In the account of Jesus glorification, we are reminded of the transfiguration of Jesus anticipates his glorification and as such, anticipates the glorious outcome for those who travel with him. In the account of Jesus glorification, we are reminded of Moses' meeting with God on Mount Sinai. Jesus now wears the mantle of Moses, as he does of the prophet Elijah. As we once listened to them, now we must listen to Jesus.

Matthew makes sure we don't miss the Exodus imagery found in this episode. He alludes to the "six days" Moses was on the mountain in the cloud prior to God appearing to him, and to the three special companions who accompanied Moses up the mountain,

In the presence of his disciples Jesus is transformed; he is visibly changed. The change images that of Moses whose face became radiant when he confronted God on Mount Sinai. Jesus, the Messiah, Son of God, takes on the mantle of "the prophet like unto Moses", as he does that of priest and king.

In the appearance of Moses and Elijah we are reminded of the great ones who have served as God's messengers. Tradition had it that both Moses and Elijah were taken bodily into heaven, even though the burial of Moses is recorded in the Bible. It was believed that both would return before the coming of the kingdom.

The feast of "Booths" commemorates God's presence and protection during the forty years Israel was in the wilderness. Peter realizes God's presence in the situation and rightly wants to build some shelters to tangibly illustrate the experience. Luke adds "not knowing what he said." Building shelters is not a problem, putting Jesus on a par with Moses and Elijah is.

While coming down the mountain, Jesus asks his disciples not to mention his transfiguration. The disciples are confused and so ask Jesus a question. They have just witnessed the appearing of Elijah. If the scribes are right in saying that Elijah precedes the messiah, why can't they tell everyone of Elijah's visit? Are the scribes wrong?

Jesus says that the Scribes are right, but that they have misunderstood the role of Elijah, just as they have misunderstood the role of the messiah. When the promised Elijah comes, he will prepare for the messiah's work to restore all things. Sadly, the Scribes have not recognized this in the ministry of John the Baptist, rather they have ignored and rejected it. They will treat Jesus in the same way. Jesus now wears the mantle of Moses, as he does of the prophet Elijah. As we once listened to them, now we must listen to Jesus.

I think the point of this went beyond simple hearing. It seems to me that the point was that they pay attention to what Jesus was teaching them about justice, fairness, and compassion. And paying attention meant putting Jesus' teachings into practice when then came down from the mountain.

That's where it gets complicated for us. When we do that, we must change the way we live. But most of us resist change. As one contemporary prophet puts it, "we try to engineer our own transformation by our own rules and by our own power." But when we try to become the masters of our own conversion, we tend to miss the log in our own eyes, in all our eyes, and obsess about the speck in others' eyes. And so, we stroll blandly through our lives, never really "hearing" what Jesus was saying at all. We'd much rather let it go in one ear and out the other so we can avoid the changes Jesus demanded of those who said they wanted to follow him.

It's only when we actually let the challenging and sometimes incredibly difficult demands of Jesus really sink in, that we can begin to change. It's only when we really hear his call to see that justice is done, that we can begin to experience the new life he offers us all. But that means that in order to really hear him, we must start with ourselves first. We must take the logs out of our own eyes. That's where real justice begins--with a change in our own hearts that translates into a different way of living. That's when we begin following Jesus' call to see that God's justice is done by doing God's will on earth as it is in heaven.

It is just that simple, it is just that hard.