



## Kirknewton and East Calder Parish Church of Scotland

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**Date: 6 March 2011**

**Sermon: Rev Dr André Groenewald**

**Reading: Matthew 17: 1-13**

### **Background to the reading**

Please if you are able to open your Bibles at Exodus chapter 24 and read from verses 12-18?

I hope you saw the many similarities between our reading and the passage in Exodus 24. Jesus also went up a mountain just like Moses. And the Lord appeared to Moses after six days just like Jesus who went after six days up to the mountain where He too was transfigured. Moses' face was also "radiant because he had spoken with the Lord" just like Jesus' face and clothes who became white as light. It seems evident that something more spectacular is happening to Jesus than what happened to Moses or even Elijah before.

In the Old Testament two mountains were inextricably associated with God namely Mount Sinai or Horeb and Mount Zion. It is on Mount Sinai where the covenant between God and Israel was sealed, where Moses spoke to God, and where God revealed his presence. Mount Zion was another favoured abode of God. These traditions clearly demonstrate the influence of Near Eastern mountain myth and specifically Canaanite mythology on Hebrew religion. Mount Zaphon was the sacred mountain of the Canaanite god Baal. Clouds were thought to be part of his entourage. References to the 'mountain of the Lord' and to the sacredness of mountains are extremely numerous in the Old Testament.

In the New Testament Jesus makes it clear that the worship of God was not restricted to any particular mountain. Yet, mountains figure prominently in contexts of worship, prayer, and events of great religious significance. The Sermon on the Mount exemplifies this continuing tradition. Jesus' temptation occurred on a very high mountain as did his transfiguration. The Mount of Olives was also the setting for Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. His betrayal occurred on the lower slopes at Gethsemane and it is reported that the Mount of Olives was the site of his ascension. The fact that Moses and Elijah appeared is no coincidence. Jewish people expected the return of both Elijah and Moses at the end of the age to make everything right that was wrong. Elijah and Moses entered into the presence of God at Mount Sinai also called Horeb in the Old Testament just like Jesus. It is clear that Peter did not have a clue what was going on. He offered to build three "skenas" for each of them. The Greek word for "skenas" is tent, a covered place, a dwelling. When Israel was journeying through the desert, they also stayed in "tents". Peter, maybe, was thinking to offer them some form of hospitality. (After all they were among the greatest of men through whom God spoke in the past.) Or simply because he wanted to make sure they stayed a bit longer. Whatever the reasons, I think Matthew

tries to emphasize the point that Peter did not understand Jesus' true mission and identity especially what lay ahead.

Then while he was still speaking a bright cloud covered them and God said for a second time that Jesus is His Son with whom He is well pleased. He also adds that they must listen to Jesus because He is the Messiah. There is again the link with God appearing to Moses in the cloud. It was also a cloud that followed the Israelites on their journey through the desert by day. In opposition to Baal worship, the Almighty God is present in the cloud.

People often fell down to the ground in the presence of God. Here it is no exception. They fell to the ground faces down and stood up only after Jesus had touched them. The fact that their faces were turned away suggests a worship position. Then they only saw Jesus. Moses and Elijah disappeared. In Matthew's Gospel the meaning is quite remarkable. Now it is only Jesus who will fulfill all their needs. They do not need another prophet. Jesus is the Son of God and will through suffering bring them in the right relationship with God. Jesus then commands them to remain quiet in the meantime but once He is resurrected they must tell everyone what they have seen and heard. Now they see a glimpse of the glory that lies ahead.

It was common Jewish thought that the prophet Elijah would introduce the coming of the Messiah and the proclamation of the end of time. Now the disciples say to Jesus but what about the predictions of the coming of Elijah? Jesus answers them by saying that he did come and they did not believe in him. Jesus was referring to John the Baptist who was considered to be a second Elijah because of all the similarities that existed between them. But Jesus also mentions his coming fate. The people who got rid of John the Baptist will also get rid of Him!

Jesus was preparing his listeners for the coming journey of suffering and glory.

## **Sermon**

Verse 5 is the text for the sermon: *While he was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"*

Jesus went up the mountain to listen to God. God spoke and confirmed that He is the chosen One. He is the only One who will save humanity from sin, death and hell. He is the One who will through suffering take the sins of humanity on Himself. He is God's beloved Son. Jesus listened and obeyed God by going on the journey of suffering and glory.

Then God commanded the disciples to listen to Jesus as well. It was by no chance that Moses and Elijah disappeared and only Jesus remained. It is the central message. They must listen to Jesus only. And yes the disciples did listen to Him – after his resurrection they did spread the good news of salvation to everyone. They walked the walk and talked the talk. They also embarked on a journey that went up mountains, down the glens, through suffering and sacrifice which ended in glory.

Do we listen to Jesus?

Sometimes we are so busy living our own lives that the buzz and hustle of everyday life silences Him. Sometimes we can be so busy "playing" church that we forget to listen to Jesus as the head and sole of the church. Sometimes we can even have long lists of everything we "presumably" do right in the eyes of the Lord, without listening to Jesus.

Why can I make such a claim? Well the proof is often in the pudding itself. If we listen to Jesus, it will be evident in our lives of faith. Let me explain:

If we listen to Jesus we will grab each and every opportunity to talk to others about his sacrifice on the cross, his resurrection and ascension,

If we listen to Jesus our world will look totally different – it would be a world where all people live in peace and harmony, a world where love and not greed is the key

If we listen to Jesus our churches would look totally different – it would be churches where the Bible text is preached, where “nonsense” does not prevail, where people do not worry about their own opinions or power plays, where people worship with love in harmony, where the church is more concerned about the Gospel and the salvation of Jesus than endless meetings about issues and money, where social gatherings are not better attended than the prayer meetings.

If we listen to Jesus, we will sing louder, pray more faithfully, sacrifice more, love vigorously, without any discrimination, and at all times have hope for the new kingdom to be with God forever and ever.

If we listen to Jesus we know when we die in faith, death is destroyed and we can cry with hope.

If we listen to Jesus we will know that our journeys of faith might not be easy but that the glory would be greater in the end,

If we listen to Jesus we will be able to climb steep mountains and find God, his peace and presence.

If we listen to Jesus we will also be able to come down from the mountain with the surety of his travelling presence with us,

If we listen to Jesus we will not be disheartened when we fall in cold lochs, or stumble over rocks or are overcome by long glens of grief and sorrow.

If we listen to Jesus our journeys will have meaning and joy always seeing the bigger picture, always looking out for the mountain top.

May we all start this new journey with Jesus on the way to Easter listening to His voice. May we also find hope, love and peace, as we tread with Him the via dolorosa, the road of suffering to His ultimate glory.

Amen