

*Sermon preached by Canon Simon Tatton-Brown*

Christ Church, Bath

Holy Eucharist

Sunday next before Lent  
23 February 2020

[Exodus 24.12-18]

2 Peter 1.16-21

St Matthew 17.1-9

For much of my ministry the Church of England has been agonising over falling numbers and low church attendance. Of particular concern is the dearth of younger people in our congregations. How many of our grandchildren do we see in church?

Many, perhaps most, attempts at remedying this focus on worship. Church is boring, so it's said, so let's try music groups and café church and services at different times and days of the weeks. I've nothing against café church (I've led such services myself – those in my last parish who were the most enthusiastic tended to be in their nineties. “Vicar, it was lovely. We could sit down for the whole service!”)

It's all very laudable, but I wonder if we're not missing the point. I think a major problem is that too many people find our gospel frankly incredible. They just don't believe it. They might imagine that we haven't moved on from the way they remember Sunday School. They're increasingly turned off by the traditional hard-line still taken by our bishops on sexuality. And the stories they

hear about sexual abuse in the church don't help either.

We've got a huge problem and it's about authority. What is our authority?

It's not a new question of course. When we get to Holy Week we're going to hear Jesus being asked the same question. And if we think he had an answer to hand by appealing to the authority of, say, Moses and Elijah – well, that's not going to cut much ice today either.

First century Israel was as divided over religion as Britain is divided over Brexit. There were the Sadducees and Pharisees, the Essenes and the Zealots. I can remember hearing the Chief Rabbi on Thought for the Day quoting the ancient Jewish joke that if you put two rabbis in the same room you'll get three opinions. When you read the Old Testament, much of it is the story of infighting among God's Chosen People. Yes, Jesus does quote authority. He quotes the scriptures, frequently. But I don't think he ever relied on them alone to justify either his teaching or his ac-

tions. His line was more “You have heard that it was said..., but I say to you.”

Nevertheless, I’ve little doubt that there have been Christian apologists who have appealed to stories like that of the Transfiguration to buttress Christ’s authority. We heard as much in our epistle, when the author (was he really Saint Peter? You can argue either way, and theologians have.) claims “we have been eyewitness of his majesty”. The presence of Moses and Elijah, standing for the Law and the Prophets, has frequently been cited as evidence of Christ being the fulfilment of all that was foretold. But...

*As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead. Why?*

A hundred years ago liberal theologians were arguing that Jesus deliberately played down his status, eschewing the title Messiah and Son of God for the low-key alternative Son of Man. It would explain, so they thought, why so few people recognised him for who he is. I don’t

think so, not least because Son of Man (and Matthew's Greek has *Son of the Man* at this point) is quite likely another way of him saying Second Adam – quite a claim.

Just let's for a moment take the story of the Transfiguration at face value. (My own view is that it's more of a parable than a historical account.) Why doesn't Jesus cite his meeting with Moses and Elijah as authority for his teaching. "You doubt my word? Moses and Elijah don't. And I've got three witness who were with me to prove it, Peter James and John."

But he didn't, not even when he was on trial for his life. My guess (and it's only a guess – I wasn't there) is that he'd already considered doing such a thing before, as we'll hear next Sunday when the gospel readings tell us of his temptations in the wilderness. It's all too easy for religious teachers and leaders to fall back on external authorities like Scripture when we want to buttress our teachings. They say "The Bible tells you so." And if the listener is the sort of person who accepts the Bible as the word of God, there's not

much more to be said. But that wasn't Jesus' way. It's too open to abuse.

What Christ tells us to do is use our ears and our eyes. When John the Baptist sent from prison to ask if he really was the One who was to come Jesus replied "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them." When St Matthew says "for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes" he means that Christ's authority came from his own integrity. We might want to use the word 'authentic'.

We're living at a time when peoples' trust in authority is at a very low ebb. It's an age of fake news, of opinions rather than facts. We hear politicians saying they've had enough of experts. And speaking personally, I too have to say that I'm no longer as trusting of the old dogmas as I once was, and that the older I get, the more agnostic I become when it comes to saying just what it is I believe.

But that doesn't mean I don't have faith – faith in the sense of trust. For all my doubts and questionings, it's my experience that the Christianity I know works.

It's worked for me when I've been bereaved and plunged into grief. It's worked for me when things have been bad and the way ahead was by no means clear. My membership of this community has given me friendships, and my life meaning, a sense of purpose and direction; and it continues to do so. Yes, I have my regrets like we all do. But I'm glad I made the choices I did, and I can see that my early Christian formation helped me make the right ones.

And this is how I think Peter James and John were too. Jesus had ordered their silence – for now. Over the next few months, as Christ went up to Jerusalem and all that followed, their world fell apart, culminating in the horrors of Good Friday. Three days later, it changed. Why? How? What did it mean?

Whatever experience they may have had when Jesus took them up the mountain, they used their

memory of those events to try and explain who he was. There'd always been more to Jesus than met the eye. The only words they had to hand to say what it had been like on the mountain was language usually reserved for a god – a face like the sun, clothes as white as light (my translation). Yes, his teaching does sum up the law and the prophets, as if Moses and Elijah had briefed Jesus themselves. It had all been like another Exodus (and in St Luke's version, this was the word that was used to describe Christ's conversation with the two prophets). Their vision on the mountain top was a glimpse of heaven.

And over the next few years, Peter James John and their companions established a new community – the church – whose very life was and is intended to open the eyes of all who come into contact with it, that they – that we – might see heaven too.