

So just to make sure I've got the right perspective on passages like this, I like to look at the preceding verses. As often happens, I found some illumination; just before this passage is that moment when Jesus was praying alone, about a week before the transfiguration, and he asks the disciples, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" and they mumble something about John the Baptist or Elijah, or one of the ancient prophets. Then he asks, "But who do you say that I am?" and Peter answers the \$64,000 question: "The Messiah of God."

Now, as much as his answer is wonderfully unequivocal, I think it comes off sounding kind of blasé. There's no accompanying fanfare, even though, as Peter and the original Jewish readers of this Gospel would have known, this simple statement meant that he was living in a moment the Jewish people had anticipated for thousands of years.

Now, imagine how confused he and the other disciples there would've been, not to mention how absolutely gutted, when Jesus responded not just by swearing them to silence, but telling them everything he had to undergo, even unto his own death, and it was going to happen soon. According to the author of Matthew's Gospel, Peter was so upset by this that he confronted Jesus and argued with him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." Why? Because that's not how the story was supposed to go, according to Jewish tradition and legend!

As a Jew steeped in that tradition, Peter's vision for Israel's salvation was small and local and tribal, but as we know, Jesus was readying himself for something so much bigger. Hence his stinging reply to Peter: "Get behind me, Satan!"

So, turning to today's lesson, only a week or so later in Gospel time, I have no doubt that Peter would have still been thinking about that confrontation, even as he accompanied Jesus and James & John up the mountain to pray. Let's keep that in mind, as we go on.

While they're praying, they're joined by Moses and Elijah—whom we've been taught are synonymous with the Law and the Prophets—this would have firmly grounded Jesus in Jewish history for the original readers of this message. All three are surrounded in glory as a conversation ensues about Jesus's impending departure from the earthly realm. The disciples witness this, weighed down with sleep but conscious enough to register what's happening.

And how did they react? Well, what comes out of Peter's mouth is, well, mind-boggling to say the least: "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings (remember: booths, tabernacles, tents evoke the OT tent of meeting; a focus of worship) one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." It's almost laughable that the author of Luke is so explicit in stating the obvious: Peter didn't know what he was saying. Oh, Peter. I've heard it's better to be silent and thought a fool than to open one's mouth and remove all doubt. Doubtless, it was a foolish thing for Peter to say, but I can understand why he said it, and honestly, I love him for saying it.

The Jews always envisioned the Messiah coming like the proverbial white knight on a steed to save the day. This thing that was happening in front of Peter's eyes—the transfiguration of Jesus, Moses and Elijah appearing—was probably exactly the kind of miracle Peter had hoped for, considering how, just before they went up the mountain, Jesus had foretold his death. I can understand how Peter might have thought this would change everything; how—if there were dwellings for Jesus, Elijah and Moses on the mountain—that they would all stay there and be worshipped in glorious isolation, and the long-awaited moment of the Messiah would play out as it had been envisioned.

If, then, having suffered first the prospect of Jesus' prediction—that "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed"—and then had his hope raised in this vision of the transfiguration and the appearance of Moses and Elijah—how much more gutted do you think Peter would've been to be chastised once again, this time by the very voice of God issuing forth from an overshadowing, enveloping cloud? "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

If Peter felt like he was on shaky ground before that, I daresay it got real solid real fast. So much for Peter, who, like so many of us, when confronted by the reality of the Divine, simply reacts to what's happening in the moment without questioning the deeper meaning, or the bigger picture. And that is exactly what we're left with: This image of Peter struggling with his small, limited vision of salvation for the Jewish people, alongside what we know is the infinitely bigger picture, the picture that is no less than cosmic in scale.

So how do we react, and what do we take away from this? Are we standing on the mountaintop, as bewildered as Peter, James & John? Well, with the benefit of a couple thousand years and the ministry of Paul, I'd say we're just a bit more hopeful than that.

In his 1<sup>st</sup> Letter to the Corinthians (chapter 15), the Apostle talked about the very thing Peter was hoping for—what we're all hoping for—an end to the suffering in the earthly realm, and the final, full realization of the kingdom of God on earth. Paul talked about flesh versus spirit, about what is perishable versus the imperishable, if you recall. This is what we and Peter are waiting for: For what is flesh to be transformed into spirit. For what is sown in dishonour to be raised in glory, for what is sown in weakness to be raised in power. For what is physical to be transformed into spirit and thereby transported to a realm where suffering no longer exists. In 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians (chapter 3), Paul says, "the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom," and furthermore, "all of us [...] are being transformed."

This brings into focus what we've heard in Jesus's Sermon on the Plain. We've been encouraged to do exactly what God is saying to Peter in this Gospel; namely, to listen to Jesus and be transformed. Today's Gospel is about the transfiguration of Jesus—a transformation he underwent—but it's also about what's about to happen to Peter when he stops seeing Jesus in the light of Jewish tradition, and what will happen to us when we stop making Jesus solely a focus of our worship and start actually listening to him as God instructs.

So here's your homework, if I may be so bold: Go back and read Luke 6 from the spot where Jesus comes down and stands on that "level place" in verse 17. Listen to him tell us what will happen when we stop thinking small like Peter and the rest of the Jews of his day; when we stop imagining the kingdom as something we are to elevate and venerate, and start seeing it as where we live and breathe. Listen to Jesus as he tells us what happens when we offer those things to the world which we have received from God—grace, mercy, and loving kindness—things that build up individuals and communities where vengeance and retribution only serve to tear them down. Listen to Jesus tell us how we will be transformed into people whose concerns are more spiritual than physical, more gracious, more merciful, more loving, more kind and compassionate. If we simply listen to him.

Amen? Amen!