

JESUS IS A WORLD ABOVE THE BEST!

Today's Text: Matthew 17: 1-13

Extracts:

Now after six days *Jesus* took Peter, James and John his brother, led them up on a high mountain by themselves; and He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light. And behold, *Moses and Elijah* appeared to them, talking with Him. Then *Peter* answered and said to *Jesus*, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, let us make here three tabernacles: one for You, one for *Moses* and one for *Elijah*." While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them; and suddenly a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!" And when the disciples heard it, they fell on their faces and were greatly afraid... *When they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only* [Matt. 17: 1-8]

In the last two weeks following the June 12 Presidential elections in Iran, the news channels gave much prominence to the post-election crisis there and the global demonstrations in support of the opposition. Then at mid-morning on Thursday, 25 June 2009, just out of the blues came the news flash: Michael Jackson had suffered cardiac arrest and had been rushed to the UCLA Medical Center! Before anyone could take that in, the unanticipated happened. Michael Jackson, the 'King of Pop' was dead! Everything else stopped. His fans world- wide are keeping vigils. On every media channel, print, electronic or online, Michael Jackson has remained the news.

Why has Michael Jackson stolen the limelight? I believe that, apart from his major contribution to pop music, his 'Thriller' being reportedly the best selling album in history, he has been good for audience rating. The whole world has risen with one voice to mourn his death. Who would not want to cash in on that? He was the best among the rest.

In this week's study of the Transfiguration of Christ, Peter proposed three tabernacles to be built one each for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. We do a similar thing when we treat angels, dead saints or prophets and church leaders as if they were divine. God reacted instantly to show Peter that Jesus was not just the best among the rest. In fact, He was a world above the best! That is what we shall find out from this week's study.

1. Background: What was Peter thinking?

The Transfiguration occurred six days after certain developments in the earthly ministry of Jesus, and the following should be noted:

- Peter had just confessed the divinity of Jesus as the Christ, following which Jesus revealed His church to His disciples [**Matt. 16: 13-19**];
- Jesus began to speak more explicitly about His salvation mission. He needed to go to Jerusalem, suffer many things in the hands of the elders, chief priests and scribes and be killed. However, He would be raised on the third day [**vv. 20-21**];
- Peter, ignorant then of the spiritual import of what Jesus had told them, took Him aside and rebuked Him, saying that such a thing should not happen to Jesus. The Lord knew instantly that it was Satan that was speaking through Peter and He rebuked the devil [**vv.22-23**];
- Jesus used that opportunity to make His earthly mission clearer, namely (1) if you desire to follow Him, you must be ready to take up your cross; and (2) it is of no profit for people to gain the whole world and lose their own souls in hell [**vv. 24-25**];
- Christ will surely return with His angels in His Father's glory to judge the world and reward each person "according to his works" [**v. 27**].

After the above developments, Jesus led Peter, James and John up on a high mountain by themselves [**Matt. 17: 1**]. Why those three and not the twelve? Is there any particular explanation for that? I believe that only Jesus knows why! For example, it was also three of them that Jesus took beyond a point in the Garden of Gethsemane to keep watch with Him during His Passion [**Matt. 26: 37**]. Here is a profile of those three apostles:¹

- James and John were brothers, the sons of Zebedee [**Matt. 10: 2**]. Fishermen by profession, they were Peter's business partners [**Lk 5: 10**] and had paid employees [**Mk 1: 20**]. Jesus surnamed James and John "Boanerges" (the sons of thunder), an indication of their fiery disposition [**Matt. 10: 2-4; Mk 3: 17**]. You may recall that they were the ones who asked for His permission to command fire from heaven to consume the Samaritans for refusing to receive Jesus on His way to the cross in Jerusalem [**Lk 9: 54**]. They were ambitious and manipulative. With their mother's connivance [**Matt. 20: 20-28**], they wanted to be given the two seats (on the right and left of Jesus) when the Lord would return in His glory [**Mk 10: 35-44**]. In the end, James became the first martyr among the apostles when he was killed by Herod Agrippa [**Acts 12: 2**]. John became the guardian of Mary, the mother of Jesus after His death,

¹ Based on "Christ's Inner Circle," *Weekly Bible Study*, Vol. 1 No. 11: 3 December 2000; http://www.bibleresourcecentre.com/Volume_1/PDFs/ChristInnerCircle.pdf

resurrection and ascension [Jn 19: 26-27], and lived long enough to lead the church into its first century.

- Peter was introduced to Jesus by his brother, Andrew [Jn 1: 40-42]. Poorly educated [Acts 4: 13] and married [Mk 1: 30; 1 Cor. 9: 5], he lived by fishing, like his business partners, James and John. It was Jesus that changed his name to Cephas (Peter), meaning a stone [Jn 1: 42]. Where he was strong, nobody could beat him, such as fishing all night even after catching nothing [Lk 5: 5], or staying on course even when rowing against strong winds [Mk 6: 47-48]. However, he could easily be cowed by an unexpected turn of events, such as denying knowing Jesus thrice [Matt. 26: 69-75]. But he was ever inquisitive. He asked or answered Jesus most of the daring questions [Matt. 17: 4; 18: 21; 19: 27; Mk 8: 27-29]. He was a born leader who led the church through its teething stage after the Pentecost. Church history confirms that he was crucified (upside down) in Rome, just as Christ had prophesied that in his old age, he would stretch out his hand and another would gird him and carry him where he did not wish [Jn 21: 18]..

Now, back to our story! On the high mountain, Jesus was transfigured before Peter, James and John, and “His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light.” Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Jesus [Matt. 17: 2-3]. Apparently overwhelmed by what they were looking at, impulsive Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, let us make here three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah” [v. 4]. Three tabernacles? What was Peter thinking? Let us examine the matter of the tabernacle before we return to our main story.

2. What the tabernacle is all about

When Solomon was dedicating the temple that he had built in Jerusalem, he said, “Will God in deed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain You. How much less this temple which I have built?” [1 Kgs 8: 27]. The Lord God Himself told Isaiah the prophet, “Heaven is My throne, and earth is My footstool. Where is *the house* that you will build Me? And where is *the place* of My rest?” [Is. 66: 1]. Immediately, we understand from the forgoing that the tabernacle has never been about a structure but about a *relationship*.

Human beings have a problem relating to persons or things that they cannot see, feel or touch. On Mount Sinai, while giving Moses the Ten Commandments, God specified, “You shall not make for yourself a carved image – *any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth*” [Ex. 20: 4]. Yet, when it came to specifying worship rituals for the children of Israel, God said to Moses, “Let them make Me a sanctuary, *that I may dwell among them*. According to all that I show you, that is the pattern of the tabernacle and the pattern of all its furnishings, just so you shall make it” [Ex. 25: 8-9]. The structure of the Tabernacle , the garments of the high

priest and the consecration of priests, and the variety and patterns of worship, among others, are well documented in the book of Exodus [Chaps. 25- 31] A short history of the tabernacle can be summarized as follows:

- It began as a meeting place for “Moses took his tent and placed it outside the camp and called it the tabernacle of meeting. And it came to pass that everyone who sought the Lord went out to the tabernacle of meeting which was outside the camp.” Each time Moses went there, “the pillar of cloud descended and stood at the door of the tabernacle, *and the Lord talked with Moses*” [Ex. 33: 7-11]. As the children of Israel travelled during their forty years in the wilderness, the tabernacle was the earthly indicator of God’s presence among the people, and “Whenever the cloud was taken up from above the tabernacle, the children of Israel would go onward in all their journeys. But if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not journey till the day that it was taken up, *for the cloud of the Lord was above the tabernacle by day, and fire was over it by night*, in the sight of all the house of Israel throughout all their journeys [Ex. 40: 34-38].
- On arrival in the Promised Land, “the whole congregation of the children assembled together at Shiloh, and set up the tabernacle of meeting there. *And the land was subdued before them*” [Josh. 18: 1]. That was how Shiloh became *the place of worship*, where Samuel, the prophet was raised [1 Sam. 1: 3; 3: 19-21]. In due course, David brought the “Ark of God” that had traded hands in battles between Israel and the Philistines into the City of David (Zion) [2 Sam. 6: 16]. His heart’s desire was to build a house for the Ark of God that dwelt “inside tent curtains” [2 Sam. 7: 1-2]. However, God forbade him, saying, “Would you build a house for Me to dwell in? For I have not dwelt in a house since the time that I brought the children of Israel up from Egypt, even to this day, but have moved about in a tent and in a tabernacle” [vv. 5-7]. God told David that his son and successor would build Him a house of worship [v. 12]. In deed, Solomon, David’s son, built a magnificent *temple in Jerusalem* and “the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord” [1 Kgs 8: 10-11].
- Speaking through Nathan the prophet, God had given David a vision of his descendant that would build a house for Him and that He would “establish the throne of his kingdom forever.” God would be his father and he would be His son [vv. 12-14]. Ordinarily, that would apply to Solomon. But we know that his kingdom fell into pieces and the children of Israel ultimately wound up in exile in Babylon. But when Jesus was to come in flesh through the womb of a virgin called Mary, the angel (Gabriel) that brought the good news to her said, “You will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, *and of His kingdom there will be no end*” [Lk 1: 31-33].
- When the prophet Isaiah prophesied the birth of Jesus through a young virgin, the name given to the child was “Immanuel” [Is. 7: 14], which

means “God With Us.” If the tabernacle represents the sanctuary where God may dwell among the children of Israel [Ex. 25: 8-9], then *Jesus means the tabernacle of God among them!* That may in part explain His answer when the Jews challenged Him to show them a sign why He was driving away from the temple the merchants and money changers. He said, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” They thought that that would be impossible because it took forty years to build that temple but the gospel writer added, “but He was speaking of the temple of His body” [Jn 2: 14-21]. That is why the word of God has confirmed that [Heb.9: 11-15]:

Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands ... but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place, once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. ... And for this reason, He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance.

Now you can understand better why God the Father reacted the way He did to Peter’s request to Jesus to make three tabernacles: one for Jesus, one for Moses and one for Elijah. We are told that while Peter was still speaking, “a bright cloud overshadowed them, and suddenly a voice came out of the cloud, saying, ‘This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!’” Peter and his colleagues fell on their faces on hearing that and were greatly afraid. Jesus put His reassuring hand on them and said, “Arise, and do not be afraid.” When they finally were able to open their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only [Matt. 17: 5-8]. Moses represents Law and Elijah represents the prophets. They were never in the same league with Jesus the Christ. Therefore, there can only be one tabernacle, not three.

3. Conclusion: So Jesus the Christ is a world above the best!

After He had risen from the dead, Jesus showed Himself to Peter, James and John and their fellow disciples, and said, “These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, *that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me.*’ Then “He opened *their understanding* that they might comprehend the Scriptures” [Lk 24: 44-45]. Recalling his experience of the Transfiguration, a now better informed Peter confirmed, “as eyewitnesses of His majesty”, that Jesus ‘received from God the Father honour and glory when such a voice came to Him from the Excellent Glory: ‘This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased,’ and we heard this voice which came from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain” [2 Pet. 16-18].

From our study, God has confirmed that there is one Tabernacle by whom He can dwell among us. That is, Jesus the Christ, the “Word (that) became flesh and dwelt among us” and “as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe on His name” [Jn 1: 12, 14]. He is the “Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” [Rev. 13: 8], from the Garden of Eden to Golgotha! That is why everyone, from Moses to Malachi has pointed all seekers of true relationship with God in His direction For example:

- Moses told the children of Israel in the wilderness, “And the Lord said to me, ... ‘I will raise up for them a Prophet like you from among their brethren, and will put My words in His mouth, and He shall speak to them all that I command Him. And it shall be that whoever will not hear My words, which He speaks in My name, I will require it of him” [Deut. 18: 17-19];
- God promised through the prophesy of Malachi, “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord; and he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers” [Mal. 4: 5-6]. As Jesus Himself later confirmed, John the Baptist came in the spirit of Elijah “and if you are willing to receive it, he is the Elijah who is to come” [Matt. 11: 14]. After the Transfiguration, His disciples asked why the scribes should insist on Elijah’s coming first as evidence of the coming of the Messiah, Jesus replied, “In deed, Elijah is coming first and will restore all things; *but I say to you that Elijah has come already* , and they did not know him but did to him whatever they wished.” The disciples understood that He spoke to them about John the Baptist [Matt. 17: 10-13].
- John the Baptist pointed his listeners to the one whose sandal strap he was not worthy to loose. So, soon after baptizing Jesus, John drew his followers’ attention to Him, saying, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” [Jn 1: 26-29]. As he wound down his own ministry, John said with gladness, “You yourselves bear me witness that I said, ‘I am not the Christ,’ but, ‘I have been sent before Him,’ ...The joy of mine is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease” [Jn 3: 28-30].

There is only one tabernacle on ‘Salvation Mountain’ It is for Jesus the Christ. He is not just the best of the rest. He is a world above the best!