

February 18 & 19, 2012 – Church of the Epiphany

- The Rev. Dr. Tim Perry

### **The True King**

This is the last Sunday of the season of Epiphany. It is that season of the year that follows Christmas, when we celebrate the appearance of Christ. It is also that season of the Church year that precedes Lent, when we prepare ourselves for the events of Holy Week and Easter, when we remember the climax of Jesus' ministry, grieve his death on the cross and celebrate his glorious resurrection.

Epiphany is that time of year, in other words, that is devoted to reflecting on the identity of he who came at Christmas, of he who died on Good Friday and rose again on Easter Sunday. It is a time for asking just who this man from Nazareth is. And of course, this is a theme that has run through the various Gospel passages that we have looked at over the last few weeks. "Who is this man that he teaches with authority?" asked the amazed crowd on several occasions. "I know who you are: The Holy One of God." said the demon in the synagogue.

In the story of the raising of the paralytic, which concludes the cycle of miracle stories that we have been looking at, Jesus declares, "So that you may know that the Son of Man has authority to forgive sins, rise, take up your mat and go."

Now this theme that has lurked throughout the last few Sundays comes in this final passage to the fore. Now we need to put ourselves in the place of the disciples, and the crowds. Now we need to ask again, "Who is this man?"

Who is this man who calls seekers and sitters and skeptics? Who is this man who calls fishermen to fish for people? Who is this man who declares himself to be the enemies of all God's enemies? Who is this man who claims to forgive sins?

He is the Son of Man—so Jesus himself says when he raises the paralyzed man. Rooted in Daniel 7, it's a title for a heavenly figure who would in the end time receive from God an everlasting kingdom and the authority to rule it. When Jesus comes

preaching that the time is fulfilled, that the kingdom of God is here, that it is time to repent and believe all the while taking for himself the title Son of Man, he is in other words, talking about himself. The Son of Man has come—the time is fulfilled. The Son of Man is reigning—the kingdom of God is here. The Son of Man will judge and forgive and heal and restore. Repent and believe the good news!

Now we must ask, in the glorious light of the transfiguration, what are we going to do with the Son of Man. For now, we have come to the climax to our epiphany journey. With Jesus, Peter, James and John we have climbed the mountain. We have just seen Jesus disclosed, revealed, made known in his glory. The glory of the heavenly Son of Man attested to by both the embodiment of the Law—Moses and the Prophets—Elijah. We have heard again God's heavenly voice claiming Jesus' as his Son, authorizing his words, and commanding our assent. Are you ready to make up your mind yet?

And now to say something surprising: It's okay to be unsure. It's okay to be just a little worried about this man and the demands he places on your life. Who among us, whether we would class ourselves as Christians of long-standing, or short-standing, or not at all, cannot say that the Gospels have presented a picture of a man that is at once compelling and off-putting. Compelling because he is so attractive, so compassionate, so driven himself by compassion for the everyday needs of everyday people. And off-putting for the sheer power embedded in the words "Be quiet. Come out of him." Or "I will it. Be Made Clean."

Which brings us to the second context that we need to be aware of. The first context was our context as contemporary readers of Mark's Gospel during Epiphany. The second context is the literary context of the transfiguration story in Luke's Gospel. And once that context is made plain, second and even third thoughts will be seen to be appropriate. Let me explain.

The story of Jesus' transfiguration in front of Peter, James and John comes just after the turning point of Luke's Gospel. A point at which readers move a series of

stories recounting victory after victory to a second series recounting what appears to be defeat after defeat.

In the first eight chapters of Mark, Jesus confounds his enemies. He dispatches demons with a word. He heals the sick, cleanses lepers, he even raises the dead. He bests his critics in debate, leaving them looking foolish. He even displays uncanny powers over the natural world itself, calming storms and multiplying food.

They end with Jesus taking his disciples north to Caesarea Philippi, to ask them some pointed questions. Who do people say that I am? Who do you say that I am? And Peter, well, Peter gets it right. You are the Messiah, he says to Jesus. You are the Son of the living God.

And precisely at that point, the tone then changes. Then, says the text, Jesus began to teach them that he must suffer. That he would be rejected. That he would be killed and that after three days, he would rise again. The situation has just become very serious, indeed. Yes he is the Messiah. Yes he is the Son of Man. Yes he is the Holy One of God as the demons recognized. But he was going to fulfill this role in a way that nobody expected. His way will be the way of the cross. The way of suffering and death.

The rest of Jesus' ministry, as it is recounted in the Gospel of Luke, will be so frustrating, so disappointing that we will need assurance that, indeed, we're not wrong about Jesus. That our decision to follow Jesus was the right one.

So, it's ok to be unsure as we move to the third context—the story itself. It's ok to have doubts as we climb the mountain with Peter and James and John. And with them we see Jesus transfigured and revealed in the glory of his father. And with them we see him receiving the endorsement of Moses and Elijah. And once again, we hear God's voice claiming Jesus as his Son.

The story is designed to show the uniqueness of Jesus as God's agent. This is made plain at two points. First, having been taken up the mountain by Jesus and seen his glorious transfiguration with Moses and Elijah, Peter is overcome and begins to babble: "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us make three tabernacles—one for

Moses, one for Elijah. . ." and before he can finish his remarks, he is interrupted by the presence of the cloud and God's voice saying, "This is my beloved Son. Hear him." In other words, do not be distracted by Moses and Elijah. Pay attention to Jesus. He is God's son.

Second, once the cloud disappears, along with Moses and Elijah, the point made by the heavenly voice is underscored. The disciples are to look for direction only to Jesus. Only Jesus, not the great prophet Elijah and not the great lawgiver, Moses, can accomplish God's plan. At their best, they attest to the One who surpasses them. To Jesus, the heavenly Son of Man.

An altogether haunting passage. Jesus' transfiguration has given the disciples a glimpse of the glory of Jesus when he comes in the full power of the kingdom of God. But they have been told that Jesus must first undergo the passion before this dream can be realized.

And we find ourselves this morning much in the same place as the disciples did back then. These past weeks, we have been nearly overwhelmed by the power of Jesus' words and deeds.

We have seen Jesus' identity disclosed: he is the heavenly Son of Man, who has been given a kingdom by God, who has been authorized to rule that kingdom by God, and whose reign will never end. The climax of that disclosure is the story of the transfiguration itself. Where Jesus is seen in his glory.

But that picture would be one-sided if we did not go on to stress that Jesus' way to that glory is not a way of glory. It is a way of suffering. It is a way of the cross. It is a hard way. It's like the eye of a needle. It's like a narrow door opening on to a rough path. Few there be, says Jesus, that find it.

You have glimpsed Jesus in his glory. Now, will you follow Jesus to the cross?