

2026 TALK, 15.3.26, (EX. 24:1-11), MARK 9:1-10

LENT SERIES (4): 'JESUS, THE DISCIPLES & DISCIPLE-MAKING – BUILDING THE CHURCH THROUGH SMALL GROUPS'

'LET'S BUILD SOME SHELTERS'...

This story is a stand-out moment in the gospels. It sits like a beating heart at the very core of Matthew, Mark & Luke. Like a most brilliant gem waiting to be discovered amongst a hoard of other treasure. The transfiguration of Jesus... Wow! Pointedly halfway between the baptism of Jesus & the crucifixion of Jesus. Each of these three significant events are momentous revelations, when the glory of Jesus is most clearly seen by those who were there at the time.

Which begs a question about what happens here on this mountain top. Why did Jesus only take just three of his disciples: Peter, James & John...? Why did Jesus not want *all* of his disciples to see him revealed in his heavenly glory? This seems to be the first time (but not the last time) that Jesus divides up the disciples and asks just these three to accompany him. (Another occasion is at Gethsemane, which we will be re-visiting in 2 weeks time, on Palm Sunday). Why did Jesus split up the two brothers, Peter & Andrew, while the other brothers, James & John are kept together? Surely all this is a guaranteed recipe for jealousies & resentment amongst the disciples...?

It's difficult to understand Jesus' thinking here. Except to say that, perhaps he knew these three were the most likely to be able to keep this to themselves. Taking all 12 with him would have significantly increased the chances of all sorts of rumours & gossip being spread abroad. Loose talk of a dazzling Jesus, talking with Moses & Elijah, would have attracted even bigger crowds and much more attention, a lot of it unwanted. As we know from the story of Gideon & other Bible stories, for God, sometimes smaller numbers are better. Less chance for mis-understanding & hysteria.

Which brings me back to the core message of this series of talks: the importance of small groups in building the church - in the mind of Jesus. Just one historical example I would like to highlight here: The Methodist revival of the 18th century was based around a small group 'method'. This was very simple. In each place where John Wesley preached, those who responded were encouraged to meet in small groups in each town & village. Each group got new

& established believers together, encouraging each other & praying for each other in their walk with God. A pattern copied by William Carey & others...

In my title for my talk today, I have picked up on the curious words of Peter. The only recorded words of any of the disciples on the mountain top. Peter's flabbergasted response to seeing Jesus in glory, talking with Moses & Elijah. As Mark comments, like his fellow disciples, Peter was so astonished & frightened that he just didn't know what to say or even what he was saying as he opened his mouth. Trust Peter to blurt something out like this. "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters, one for each of you...". This makes me think that one of the reasons Jesus chose just three disciples was due to the significance of the number three, as well as a sense of fitting symmetry. Here, three glorified figures are matched by the three earthly figures of the disciples. There may be something in that...

But there is something much more significant in Peter's comment. This is not as 'stupid' a reaction as we might think. Certainly, this is often seen as Peter wanting, both selfishly & understandably, to try to make this wonderful experience more permanent, rather than just being fleeting. But there is clearly more to it than this. We only have to think of the stories of Moses & Elijah and the wider story of God's people in the wilderness to begin to unpack this.

One of the words which could be used in place of the word 'shelter' here is the word 'tabernacle' or tent... You may begin to see where I am going with this. After saving his people from slavery in Egypt, God chose to dwell in the midst of his people, in the golden ark of the covenant. And the ark was housed in a tabernacle, a tent.

One of the things God's people were instructed to do in the Law of Moses was to celebrate the Festival of Tabernacles, after the Day of Atonement each year. This was an open-air celebration. A way of remembering God's faithfulness in bringing them all out of slavery in Egypt. To remember that God chose to travel with them & provide for them, until they reached the Promised Land. Each extended family unit in Israel would give thanks to God & re-enact the exodus, by building their own tent or tabernacle and by sleeping out under the stars.

So, we can see that Peter's blurted reaction about building three shelters, comes out of his own family experience of building tabernacles each year. He was thinking – what better way to celebrate the wondrous truth that God's

very presence was dwelling among them... ? That God was continuing to lead His people towards a new life of promise...?

One of the ways of thinking of any small group that is part of any church, is that is it like a tent/tabernacle. A temporary structure which provides a place of shelter & refuge. A place where God chooses to dwell. A place where God's people can gather in small groups to celebrate God's goodness. A place to encourage one another on our spiritual journey. A place to remind ourselves that we are all just 'sojourners' or travellers in this world. We are not meant to leave much of a 'footprint' in this world, but we are called to 'invest our treasure in heaven'. If anything is a meaningful picture for us, during the season of Lent, it is the picture of a tent/tabernacle. A temporary structure, which serves its purpose for a time. God's people are called to travel together & support each other, through small groups gathered in God's presence.

After this memorable encounter between heaven & earth, Jesus & the disciples come down the mountain together. The disciples seem to be silent, trying to make sense of what they have just witnessed & been a part of. And Jesus reads their minds. They are not to do what they would have instinctively done otherwise. They are not blurt out to the other disciples what just happened. Which would, of course, for one thing, immediately have made the other disciples jealous. Jesus tells them, they are to keep all this between the four of them, until 'the Son of Man had risen from the dead'...

This comment then sparks an animated conversation among these three disciples. What on earth could Jesus mean by 'rising from the dead?'. Of course, with the benefit of hindsight, this is obvious to us. But for those first disciples this must have seemed like 'gobbledegook'. It might have even sounded alarming or futile talk. The disciples knew that no-one came back from the dead. Or that anyone who appeared to come back from the dead would be a ghost or restless spirit, who would best be avoided.

The close of this story, as well as what happens when Jesus returns to the rest of the disciples, reminds us of some of the limitations & problems which can be associated with small groups. Here the disciples are scratching their heads together. They are simply pooling their collective ignorance. Not able to easily digest the meaty truths that Jesus has left them to chew on.

We also know (& Jesus knew very well too) that any small group of people can become a vehicle for conjecture, gossip & untruths. Just like social media on a smaller scale. This much is obvious. But something is else obvious from this story. The only other recorded words from this mountaintop are these. A voice declares from heaven, over Jesus: 'This is my Son, whom I love, listen to Him'...

Any small group that keeps listening to Jesus at its heart, will be a group which grows the faith of all those who belong to that group. Any group which fixes its eyes on our glorified Jesus & keeps our Good Shepherd at the centre, will hear God. Any small group like this, will be used by God to encourage each member of that group to follow Jesus more closely...

As with the early church, so with us. Wherever two or three (or a few more) gather to worship & pray & read scripture & break bread together, Jesus is there in the midst of them. Which brings me, briefly, to mention this other mountain top experience we read about earlier, in Exodus 24. Moses & the other leaders of Israel, invited up the mountain, into the very presence of God. I love this dumbfounded summary of their experience. Putting this into the simplest words which could be found: 'They saw God & they ate & drank'... A picture of another 'small group', finding a shelter & a home, in the presence of God. An early fore-shadowing of the church's table of communion. Alleluia!

God himself invites **you** to join with God's people. In contrast with Exodus 24, today we can all draw near. Sinful as we all are. Each of us can look to Jesus, the Lamb of God. God's sacrifice for our sin. Jesus chose to bear our sins in his body on the cross. So that no-one need be excluded or remain at a distance. We are all invited to see Jesus glorified at the mountain top. To gather as one family around the table of the LORD. To know that God wants to welcome us in his tabernacle. And more than that – the tabernacle where God chooses to dwell – that's us, both individually, but more importantly as we meet together.

Thanks be to God for the good news of Jesus this Lent.

(Like to finish by reading a poem by Malcolm Guite, with the title 'Transfiguration')... READ