

Other Bible Reading: Matthew 17:1-9

A Catholic Priest and a Rabbi were chatting one day when the conversation turned to a discussion of job descriptions and promotion.

“What do you have to look forward to in way of a promotion in your job?” asked the Rabbi.

“Well, I'm next in line for the Monsignor's job.” replied the Priest.

“Yes, and then what?” asked the Rabbi.

“Well, next I can become Bishop.” said the Priest.

“Yes, and then?” asked the Rabbi.

“If I work real hard and do a good job as Bishop, it's possible for me to become an Archbishop.” said the Priest.

“O.K., then what?” asked the Rabbi.

The Priest, beginning to get a bit exasperated replied, “With some luck and real hard work, maybe I can become a Cardinal.”

“And then?” asked the Rabbi.

The Priest is really starting to get mad now and replies, “With lots and lots of luck and some real difficult work and if I'm in the right places at the right times and play my political games just right, maybe, just maybe, I can get elected Pope.”

“Yes, and then what?” asked the Rabbi.

“Good grief!” shouted the Priest. “What do you expect me to become, GOD?”

“Well,” said the Rabbi, “One of our boys made it!”

It's a good question, though, isn't it: What do you have to look forward to?

The Christians in the early days of the church were looking forward to one big event – the return of Jesus. They sometimes called it the ‘parousia’, which is a Greek word for the splendid arrival of a dignitary or king.

The only trouble was, there were false teachers out there who mocked this core belief. ‘Where is this coming?’ they would say. ‘He certainly doesn't show any signs of coming back!’ And so they accused Peter and the other apostles of serving up cleverly invented stories. It is this that Peter is determined to challenge.

Well we are, if you haven't spotted it already, looking again at the first of our Bible readings this morning: 2 Peter 1:16-21. It's on p1222 of our church Bibles for those who want to follow more closely what I am about to say.

Here we are then, v16: "For we did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power..."

Some versions of the Bible have the word 'myth' here ... for that is what a myth is, a cleverly devised story. A cleverly concocted story. Something which may at first seem plausible, but which is, in the ultimate analysis, untrue.

As to what Peter's opponents were suggesting might have been his motivation for inventing such a doctrine, we're not told. However, some commentators hypothesise that perhaps they were saying that Peter and his apostles invented the myth of Jesus' return as a way of exerting moral control through fear.

A bit like, I suppose, people might work a bit harder if they think the boss is about to walk in the room. In fact, this thinking is not that far removed from those images which you may have seen which say, "Jesus is coming, look busy."

Well whether or not this is what Peter's opponents were saying, he is adamant that the doctrine of Jesus' return, the parousia of Christ, was not made up. On the contrary, he gives two compelling reasons why they can be confident that it is true.

1. Because the transfiguration shows that Jesus' return is going to happen.

The transfiguration was, of course, our Gospel reading this morning. It's that occasion when Jesus, along with three of his disciples, Peter, James and John, head up a high mountain. Once up the mountain, Jesus is transfigured, that is his face shines like the sun and his clothes become as white as the light. Moreover, Moses and Elijah – two key figures from the Old Testament – appear before the three disciples talking with Jesus. And a voice from the cloud – obviously God's – is heard speaking.

It is this transfiguration, argues Peter, that demonstrates they have not made up the doctrine of Jesus' return. V17 of our reading, "He received honour and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.'"

Now I have to tell you, I had do some serious work in trying to understand the logic of this for myself, for it wasn't immediately obvious to me why it should be the case that just because the transfiguration happened, Jesus' return is therefore going to happen. After all, and much to my shame, I had never really thought about the tight sequencing of these two events before.

So how *does* the fact that the transfiguration happened give us more confidence that the parousia is going to happen?

The context of the story of the transfiguration gives us our first clue. In Matthew 16:27 – just before where our Gospel reading this morning began – Jesus says, “For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done.”

Although the transfiguration, we are told, did not happen until six days after Jesus spoke these words, the fact that Matthew has chosen to locate the story of the transfiguration so soon after these words are recorded may suggest that for Matthew - although note that the same is also true for both Mark and Luke in their Gospels too - there was this tight connection between Jesus’ transfiguration and his return.

And building on that is the emphasis in Peter’s letter on words like *majesty* and *honour* and particularly *glory*, indeed *Majestic Glory* – words particularly associated with the return of Jesus but used to describe the Transfiguration.

What was going on at the transfiguration, at least in Peter’s mind? Answer, Jesus was being appointed to a particular role, that role being to be God’s king and judge at the end of time.

Well of course if Peter is right, then the transfiguration is proof positive that the return of Jesus will happen, because he has been appointed to a role which he has not yet exercised.

In which case, the only question then is, did the transfiguration happen? And about that there is no doubt because, v18, “[w]e ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain!”

In other words, we were there!

That, then, is the first reason why they can be confident that the doctrine of Jesus’ return is true: because the transfiguration shows that Jesus’ return is going to happen.

And the second reason why they can be confident that the doctrine of Jesus’ return is true is....

2. Because the Old Testament Scriptures fully expected it.

“We also have the prophetic message as something completely reliable...” writes Peter in v19.

Which prophetic message is Peter referring to? We’re not told, but most probably he is referring to the Old Testament Scriptures in general rather than specific places. And for that reason he says that his readers “will do well to pay attention to it”!

In fact, he uses the metaphor of Scripture as a light shining in a dark place. We can all identify with that, can’t we, because we have all experienced dark places where a light shining was the only thing which enabled us to see what otherwise we would not have seen.

Now there is, of course, as you will have noticed, an obvious flaw in the argument which Peter employs here. To argue that Jesus' return is going to happen because we have the prophetic message as something completely reliable, relies on it being completely reliable. But what if it's not? What if it's made up ... by people?

In the final two verses of our reading this morning, Peter addresses that concern.

"Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."

Now it is important here to understand what Peter is not saying. He is not saying that human beings had no say in what was written in the Old Testament. That would be nonsense, as any here who have read bits of the Old Testament would quickly recognise.

However, what it is saying is that through the words of the Old Testament, the mind and will of God is still in some shape and form reflected.

Peter in fact uses a maritime metaphor in his choice of words here (cf. Acts 17:15, 17). And so imagine the prophets raising their sails, so to speak, through their obedience to God. And as they raise their sails, so the Holy Spirit fills them and carries their craft along in the direction he wished.

People spoke; God spoke. Both are simultaneously true! One of the commentators puts it like this, "The fact of God's inspiration did not mean a supersession of the normal mental functionings of the human author. He did no violence to their personalities, but cooperated with them while revealing Himself through them."

Two reasons, then, why Peter's opponents and his readers can be confident that the doctrine of Jesus' return is true: because the transfiguration shows that Jesus' return is going to happen, and because the Old Testament Scriptures fully expected it.

Now in the time that remains, we've got to ask, haven't we, 'What about us? Are we persuaded that Jesus will come again in glory? Yes, I know we declare that to be the case when we say the Creed. But I also know that not everyone here assents to everything in the creed! And so I need to ask, 'Are we persuaded? Are we persuaded that Jesus will return? Or rather, like the opponents of Peter and the apostles, do we place that doctrine very firmly in the category of myth?'

Well if anyone here this morning is wavering on that doctrine, or alternatively unsure what they would say to someone who is inclined to mock such a core Christian belief, what is to be said?

Well in essence, I think, and not wishing to oversimplify the situation, surely we have to go back to the Bible, don't we, and show people why it is that we believe that Jesus *will* return, even if, humanly speaking, that seems like a far-fetched and bizarre notion. For there isn't any other reason to believe he will, apart from the fact that the Bible tells us he will.

Of course, as with Paul's opponents, that may push the question further back in our minds, or those of our mockers, namely to the question of whether Scripture itself can be relied on, can be trusted, is to be believed in the first place?

Well again, that's not necessarily an easy – or quick! - question to answer. But that's not to say that we cannot say anything in response, for there *are* things that we can say in support of taking Scripture seriously. However, such knowledge will not arrive in our heads as if by magic. And so it is incumbent on all of us to do a degree of background work in order to become more confident in knowing what it is that we believe and why we believe it. By using Bible study notes. By reading books which help us understand the Bible better. By attending short courses. By taking sermons seriously. By any means good and profitable.

I close with these words from Michael Green writing about these words which have been our Epistle reading this morning, "Whatever the precise details, the main emphasis is manifest: we are on pilgrimage throughout our lives in this dark world. God has graciously provided us with a lamp, the Scriptures. If we pay attention to them for reproof, warning, guidance and encouragement we shall walk safely. If we neglect them, we shall be engulfed by darkness. The whole course of our lives ought to be governed by the Word of God."