

Sermon for Transfiguration Sunday

Our Saviour, Wartburg & Immanuel, PMB

13. January 2008

2.Pet 1,16-21

I.i.

16 For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. **17** For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,” **18** we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. **19** And we have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, **20** knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. **21** For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.¹

Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord (2.Pet 1,2). Amen.

Once upon a time... What is your first reaction when you hear those words, “Once upon a time...”? Isn't it something like this: “Ah, let me sit back, there's a story coming. I know it's not true, but it's usually fun to listen to, and I'm bound to learn something from it...”? Once upon a time. That is the unconscious mindset many Christians have as they enter the church for the occasional worship service and to listen to the pastor's sermon. Once upon a time - “Ah, let me sit back, there's a story coming. I'm not sure if it's true, but it might be fun to listen to. I'll consider it. I'm bound to learn something from it...” Once upon a time – what we hear about here is for many so divorced from everyday life that we subconsciously treat the Word of God like a clever fable, something nice to listen to with a good moral, that we've been brought up to respect, but, you know - not much more than that.

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A Sunday school teacher once asked the class, “What is faith?” Mike’s little hand shot up like a flash. Teacher called on him, “Yes, Mike, what is faith?”, and he said: “Believing something that you know isn’t true.” Many non-Christians today would agree with Mike’s definition. They are under the impression that to become a Christian is to commit intellectual suicide, because they think that Christianity is pretty much all old-fashioned superstition and fantasy, whereas they live in the realm of the “real world” which “deals with reason, evidence and cold hard facts”. Tragically, many Christians feel much the same way, that there is a deep gulf that separates evidence and fact from the teachings of the Christian faith. When they enter the church, when the Scriptures are read or the sermon is preached, their eyes mist over, and all they hear is: “Once upon a time...”

Why do you believe what you believe? On what basis does the Christian church exist? Many Christians today are plagued by doubts that this is all a big sham, a massive scam, an historical fraud. Not so much doubts that Jesus existed, but doubts about the tenets of the faith and the doctrine of the church and the practice of piety. Doubts that this was all just made up ages ago, a kind of historical conglomeration useful for controlling people and that most of what we believe is as true as Father Christmas or the Easter Bunny – nice to believe, with a good moral lesson, but not really true, as such. Why do you believe what you believe? When you speak with people about the faith, are you able to state your faith reasonably, clearly, positively, or do you feel ashamed, as if there’s nothing really to fall back on, and that you can’t defend what you believe in anyway?

Or does God expect us to believe without any evidence at all? To answer that question, we turn to the classic case of doubt, namely to the disciple Thomas, sometimes called “doubting Thomas”. What exactly did Thomas doubt? When Jesus says to him, *Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed* (Jn 20,29b), is he saying in effect: “Thomas, you have demanded some form of evidence to bolster your faith; blessed are those who believe on the basis of no objective evidence at all!”? Perhaps Thomas was a sceptic by nature. But that’s only half the story. When we look closely, we see that all the other disciples had seen the risen Lord Jesus. That’s what they told Thomas. Thomas therefore had the benefit of seemingly overwhelming evidence that Christ had risen from the dead on the basis of corroborating eyewitness testimony from his closest friends. And yet, even in the face of that, he would not believe. Think about the importance which has always been given to eyewitness testimony. Our whole court system is built on it. The fate of all who are charged with crimes is determined largely on the basis of a reconstruction of what happened based on the evidence of eyewitness testimony. To be sceptical of this kind of evidence is to remove virtually all of history from our base of knowledge!

Peter says here: *We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.* He is

simply saying: We were there. We know who Jesus really is. We heard it. We saw it. We are eyewitnesses. This is the reason why the Christian church held the apostles in such high regard in its midst – they were living witnesses, who had walked the path with Christ, who had seen him at work and experienced the miracles, and had heard him speak. The combined witness of the apostles was the strongest testimony to the identity and mission of Jesus that the ancient church had. Eyewitness testimony! That is why Peter is so adamant here: We did not fall for a big scam. We did not fall for cunningly devised fables or cleverly invented stories, this is not some marketing ploy or some manipulative political scheme – we were there! We are eyewitnesses! The event Peter chooses to underline what they heard and what they saw is the transfiguration of Christ, described in our Gospel lesson today. ‘We heard’, says Peter, ‘how God the Father spoke! We heard His voice! He broke through into the ordinariness of our world, and He gave glory to the Lord Jesus and honour. He confirmed Jesus as His own dear Son, and we heard Him say so! And we saw – ah, we saw how our master was transfigured, how for a few moments heaven’s brilliant glory shone through him and lit up the face of the Lord, we gazed and we could not get enough of this miraculous spectacle. We were there with him on the mountain. We are not deceiving anybody. You can ask the others – we were there. We are eyewitnesses: Jesus is the Son of God.’

That is reliable evidence that will hold up in court! There were three of them who saw it. And as long as they lived, these three, Peter, James and John, they were living embodiments of the report that it happened as they said. But what happened when these eyewitnesses died? Who was then able to vouch for what they had seen and heard? That was the problem that the ancient church faced, and Peter knew it. Who would guarantee the truth of the message when the eyewitnesses were dead? What exacerbated it was that Peter knew he was about to die. He says: *I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to stir you up by way of reminder, since I know that the putting off of my body will be soon, as our Lord Jesus Christ made clear to me. And I will make every effort so that after my departure you may be able at any time to recall these things* (Vv. 13-15). At this stage the personal verbal testimony of the apostles, which had been preached in the church, now had to be recorded for future generations and future audiences as a reliable source of information and testimony to Jesus Christ, the living, resurrected Son of God. This testimony was recorded in what you and I know as most of the New Testament, the Holy Scriptures. And that was the reason why almost all of its contents were so quickly and so universally accepted within Christianity – because its contents matched exactly with the message they had been hearing from the mouths of the eyewitnesses.

Yes, the Scriptures provide continuation of the apostolic eyewitness testimony to the true nature, identity, purpose and message of Jesus Christ. Here is the testimony of those who heard and saw, who were given the mandate to go and tell: We saw Jesus shining with the glory of heaven and certified by God the Father Himself! He is the Saviour of this world and as we saw him rise, so he will return to this earth to judge the living and the dead. The Bible is all that. And yet, there is a

difference between this and every other writing penned by a human hand, and that is this: *No prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation.* All other books were written by people, human beings. But in the writing of the Bible, both God and man were active participants. God was the source of the content of Scripture, so that what it says is what God said. But the human author also actively spoke; he was more than just a recorder. Yet what he said came from God. The best way to describe this process is with the words of V.21: *No prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.* The Holy Spirit is the author of the Bible, writing it over a period of more than a thousand years using different men as active participants in the forming of this extraordinary book. It did not come about as an invention of people, it was not dreamt up in one man's imagination, it was not a collective pipe dream of one society, but over a span of time, of places, of people, of language, this book came to be as God's authoritative revelation of Himself to us, grounded in recorded history.

If the Bible were man's word, we could understand and explain it all with our human reason. But now the Scriptures are godly and come from the Spirit, so the Spirit has to give understanding and recognition to us. And we cannot divide the Bible as if to say what is of God and what not – in faith we accept and confess the whole Bible to be the divinely inspired and inerrant (faultless) Word of God. That is the basis on which the church exists, the basis of our faith, and it must be the basis of all talk about faith. And the centrepiece of God's Word, the purpose of it all is none other than Jesus Christ. All the promises of the Old Testament, which pointed to the coming Messiah of the world, they are all fulfilled in Jesus Christ: *All the promises of God find their Yes in [Christ]* (2.Cor 1,20a).

"Once upon a time..."? Dear friends, when the Word of God is read, we do not sit back. We sit forward. On the edge of our seats. God speaks! He speaks through the mouths and pens and writings of his chosen instruments, eyewitnesses to God's intervention and direction in history. This is not just a story with a nice moral lesson, it is not just a cunning tale that contains truth, this IS truth. It preaches THE truth: Jesus Christ, suffering Saviour, glorious Son of God. God's Word is not something we merely consider. No, we are compelled to study it. God speaks to you words of death and life! This is not optional. We don't just give it "a fair shake". No. The apostle eyewitness Peter gives us God's direction, how to treat His Word: *To [it] you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts...* So – we use the Bible. We pay close attention to it. We hear it. We read it. We never ignore it. God's Word is a light shining in a dark place. It will give you confirmation and certainty of Jesus, the Son of God in your heart – and in your mind. And we are unashamed in promoting this as true eyewitness testimony to our unbeliever acquaintances. We have so much to be grateful for! May the Holy Spirit, who carried along these authors speaking from God, continue to carry His Word to us and through us. Amen.

SOLI DEO GLORIA

Pastor Karl Böhmer