

THE GRAND OLD DUKE OF YORK – UP OR DOWN?

INSIGHTS FROM MARK 9

Hope Church, Sunday 26 April 2009

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INTRODUCTION

*O the grand old Duke of York, he had ten thousand men,
He marched them up to the top of the hill, and he marched them down again.
And when they were up they were up, and when they were down they were down,
And when they were only halfway up they were neither up nor down.*

[Richard Plantagenet, father of King Richard III, 1411-1460, died at Battle of Wakefield, during Wars of the Roses, 30 December 1460, at Sandal Castle, when he left castle to attack Lancastrian army.]

Everyone knows this children's rhyme, usually done as an action song (sometimes reversed for fun). The game is to do it as fast as possible and get kids confused about whether they're supposed to be up or down. What does this have to do with anything?

READING

Mark 9:2-8: *And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart by themselves; and he was transfigured before them, and his garments became glistening, intensely white, as no fuller on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses; and they were talking to Jesus. And Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is well that we are here; let us make three booths, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." For he did not know what to say, for they were exceedingly afraid. And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him." And suddenly looking around they no longer saw any one with them but Jesus only.*

PART 1 – UP. [THE MOUNTAIN TOP]

This passage which we now call the transfiguration is described in all three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark & Luke) with slightly different details, but repeated because it is important. It describes an amazing event which took place when Jesus took his three friends Peter, James and John up a mountain. What happened?

(i) v2-3. Jesus changed

- He was "transfigured" – Greek metamorphosis, different body, same organism
- "Before their eyes" – not a dream but a real event, cp Mk 9:9 "what they had seen" [although Mt 17:9 calls it a "vision", a revelation from heaven]
- garments "glistening" and "intensely white"[cp Mt 17:2 "his face shone like the sun, his garments were as white as light"]
- What happened here? The divine nature of Jesus was breaking through and becoming visible – wow!

- (ii) v4. Two visitors = Moses and Elijah, representing the law and the prophets
 - Talking with Jesus – Luke 9:30 “about his departure [Greek *exodos*] which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem”. Most people think this refers to the death of Jesus on the cross, more likely to be his ascension into heaven i.e. departure from this earthly dimension. Some even think the two men in Acts 1:9-11 were Moses and Elijah again, expected by Jewish tradition to reappear at the end of the age.

- (iii) v5-7. The disciples’ reaction = shock and awe
 - Confused, exceedingly afraid (v6)
 - Suggested building three tents (one each for Jesus, Moses and Elijah), capture the moment, make it permanent. Typical Peter = speak first, think later (open mouth, insert foot)

- (iv) v7. God’s reaction = cloud and voice
 - Visible presence of God, OT: shekinah = glory. Always appears when God is specially present: pillar of cloud in wilderness, Mt Sinai, tabernacle holy of holies, temple inauguration, baptism of Jesus, ascension, return of Jesus “in the clouds”.
 - Audible instruction from God. “This is my beloved Son” (echoes of baptism [Mt 3:17] and prophecy [Is 42:1]), “listen to him” (Peter hadn’t been – see Mk 8:31-33).

- (v) v8. The disciples’ response
 - Before: Lk 9:34 – afraid when entering the cloud. Mt 17:6 – fell on faces filled with awe. A common response to being in the special presence of God (then and now)
 - After: Saw no-one but *Jesus only* - focus

PART 1 SUMMARY

What was the purpose of this event? See Peter’s later reflection in 2 Peter 1:16-18 (also John 1:14 and I John 1:1-3)

- For the disciples – a revelation of his majesty,
- For Jesus – support and encouragement directly from God (Peter says “he received honour and glory from God the Father”). And from Moses and Elijah?

Totally amazing! Unique event, nothing like it before or since (except maybe the face of Moses shining after he’d spent time with God?)

Who would like to have been there, seen that, experienced what Peter, James and John did? Probably most of us would.

But what happened next?

PART 2 – DOWN. [THE VALLEY]

Mark 9:14-29

[Shorter version to read in Luke 9:37-43a. *On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. A man from the crowd called out, "Teacher, I beg you to look upon my son, for he is my only child. A spirit seizes him and he suddenly cries out; it convulses him till he foams, and shatters him and will hardly leave him. And I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not." Jesus answered "O faithless and perverse generation, how long am I to be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here." While he was coming, the demon tore him and convulsed him. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, and healed the boy and gave him back to his father. And they were all astonished at the majesty of God.*]

After the amazing event up the mountain, we come literally down to earth with a bump. "Meanwhile back in the valley..." a very different situation has been unfolding. This also ends up being an amazing event, but in a quite different way.

(i) v14-18. A very difficult situation.

- Characterised by confusion and conflict (v14 – a great crowd around the disciples and scribes arguing), failure and impotence (v18 – they were not able).
- Sickness and/or spiritual oppression
- Challenge to the disciples – this was within their calling. See Mark 6:7-13
 - Jesus called them, he sent them, he gave them authority (v7)
 - They went out, preached, cast out demons, healed the sick (v12-13)
 - Why not this time?
- How would the disciples have felt? Sad, frustrated, embarrassed, failures...

(ii) v19-29. Jesus reaction.

- Disappointment – he expected the disciples to cope
- Compassion – he intervened and brought healing and deliverance, "gave the boy back to his father" [note – this story is not about disciples or a demon, but about a daddy]
- Explanation – need for prayer (and fasting?). Mt 17:20 says they had little faith.

CONCLUDING QUESTIONS

Where would you rather have been:

- up the mountain with Jesus, Peter, James and John, a place of revelation in the direct presence of God, focusing on Jesus only?
- or with the other nine disciples in the valley, facing challenge and failure?

Is this a real "either-or" choice? Do we have to decide whether to be up or down? These two events happened at the same time. [See Raphael painting]

Note that we can't live on the mountain top, we must live in the valley. Special experiences happen although they are rare, but daily life is daily!

Which brings us back to the children's rhyme we started with. Jesus is like the Grand Old Duke of York. He wants us to experience both the mountain top and the valley.

He leads us up to the top of the hill,

And he leads us down again.

Both are important – to have a clear revelation of the divine nature of Jesus, and to be fulfilling our calling on earth to preach, heal and deliver. In fact we can't do one without the other.

We need to be obedient to his leading, wherever it takes us. The old children's chorus goes:

Follow, follow, I will follow Jesus,

Anywhere, everywhere, I will follow him.

Follow, follow, I will follow Jesus,

Anywhere he leads me I will follow him.

And of course this is a good summary of discipleship – our current theme at Hope Church.

We should respond to any invitation from Jesus to come with him to the mountain top ("When they were up they were up") – rare special occasions of experiencing the presence of God (e.g. retreats, weekends away, Spring Harvest, Word Alive, etc), make the most of them, don't miss the chance, respond whole-heartedly.

But we should also face the challenges of the valley with prayer and faith ("When they were down they were down") – fulfilling our calling to engage with the world in gritty daily life, including preaching the gospel, healing the sick and dealing with spiritual oppression.

We need to be where he is calling us to be today, not wishing we were somewhere else or expecting only to be in one place or the other ("When they were only halfway up they were neither up nor down"). We should not be halfway Christians, not "either-or" but "both-and".

Let's not dismiss or deny those special moments, but let's not live for them either. We need to take the revelation from the mountain top into the reality of the valley. Keep both in proper perspective – not "so heavenly-minded we're no earthly use", but not so earthbound that we forget who Jesus is and the commission he's given us.