

This Bewildering Moment

How are we to make sense of this event? There is nothing quite like it in the rest of the Gospel and it seems almost like an interruption which is impossible to explain. Yet here it sits in the midst of the ministry of Jesus, challenging us with its imagery, while at the same time remaining both baffling and concerning to our modern rational minds.

The evocative language of apocalyptic writing contains within it its own revelatory meaning. To understand this type of writing we need to unlock the words and break them open. The Gospels certainly contain such writing, as is apparent when they tell of the days of tribulation which are to come for Jerusalem. Perhaps there is a sense of this genre being used here, and what is required is that we look for the signals we are being given to understand not just what is happening, but also what is being said.

The first thing we should note is how the incident fits within an atmosphere of Old Testament imagery. A mountain is ascended and famous figures from the Old Testament make their appearance. The voice of God emanates from a pillar of cloud, and there is a clear sense of awe and wonder pervading the whole scene. So far so Old Testament, but intertwined with this are other happenings which point not backwards to the Old Testament, but rather forwards to something which is yet to take place. Confirmation of this forward movement comes from Moses and Elijah themselves, as they discuss with Jesus his forthcoming *exodus* (think *road*). In addition, the words from the cloud direct our attention not just to what is being discussed. With the added imperative to “Listen to him” (and the “him” is clearly marked out for us as he is enlightened for all to see), our gaze is fixed on Jesus. The whole incident is enveloped in a dream like sequence in which the observers Peter, James and John, not unreasonably, cannot quite get their heads around what is going on. As a consequence, Peter begins to speak with confused motives. Ultimately everything returns to normal. But does it? Clearly what we are being told and what is being described is of great significance. We have to look and try to fathom what that significance might be.

That Peter James and John were present at this moment is important. That they were heavy with sleep is interesting, that they stayed awake is crucial. It is crucial because it connects this moment to another incident when these same three apostles will once more be chosen by Jesus to accompany him to another mountain; the Mount of Olives, and on into the Garden of Gethsemane. Only this time they will fall asleep. Surely Luke is making a connection between the two. In the one they remain awake and see his glory, in the other, they fall asleep and fail to see his agony. In both there is silence; the silence generated by awe and wonder set against the silence generated by weakness of the flesh. Not their proudest moment, yet one which resonates with us because of our own human weakness.

But Luke doesn't let it rest on the mountain top. The incident is called to mind later, in the most subtle and glorious of ways. Two disciples on the road (think *exodus*) are joined by a stranger. The two are in the depths of confusion and bewilderment because of what had happened to Jesus. They are bereft, quite unable to come to terms with what has taken place. The stranger picks up on a previous conversation concerning Moses, relating the events of the last three days to what the Law and the Prophets had foretold. In the silence of the breaking of the bread, their agony is transfigured into glory, and their eyes are opened.