**Matthew 17:1-9**

**Transfiguration**

It is exactly a month ago we returned to Sydney after four weeks of holiday in India. We had a fantastic time with our families and friends – not much work to do, no sermon preparation, no church meetings. For Nita no morning rush to go to school. Just eat, sleep and talk and then more food and more talk. It was wonderful. So at the end of the holidays when it was time to return to Sydney, it was hard. We wished if only we could stretch our holidays a little longer. And I guess, it is not just with the Ghosh family, after a relaxing and comfortable holiday we all wish that if only we could spend some more days in those places, where there is no rush, no tension, no worries.

In today’s gospel story we see a similar sentiment in Peter, James and John. Well, it was not exactly a holiday for them, but a short retreat from their hard and hectic life. Since Jesus had called them to follow him, they had left their home, their family members and had been going from village to village and town to town teaching, preaching and healing. On many occasions as the Bible records they had no time to eat, or take rest for a while. So one day when Jesus tapped them on their shoulders and hauled them up the Tabor Mountain they were excited.

As they climbed the mountain the clouds came closer and closer to them and the villages and the towns with all their problems and demands got out of their sight. The air up the mountain was pure and the atmosphere tranquil. An ideal place to retreat and relax!

Then in the midst of all these something magical happened – Jesus’ appearance changed, his clothes became dazzling white. Moses and Elijah showed up and started talking to Jesus though a divine Skype. It was surreal. It was heavenly. But it was real for the disciples. They witnessed the heavenly.

So heavenly that Peter immediately grabbed the moment and proposed – “Jesus, why don’t we stay here for ever?” He even came up with a practical suggestion, “Let’s make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.”

Do you think Peter was naïve?

But isn’t that what we all aim for – “to dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.” So for them when it became so handy why would they let it go? Peter, James and John – only human like us, felt that life would be really good if only they could take hold of that moment, seize it and keep it forever – that heavenly brush. After all who likes all the troubles and problems of life, the sufferings and pain that life throws at us down in the valley? I don’t think there was much difference between Peter, James, John and us. Like us at the end of a great holiday, they too wanted to extend their worry free life at the mountain top for some more time.

But soon a cloud came and overshadowed them. And from the cloud came a voice – “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; **listen to him**!”

You know, because of our too much familiarity with this story the whole thing seems pretty contained and tame. But try to imagine it.

Imagine, if it happened here.

Imagine, you came to church one Sunday.

You took your seat.

You greeted those around you.

You prayed quietly for God’s presence in the worship.

And then suddenly in the middle of the service -- out of nowhere -- there was a flashing light that filled the sanctuary. The penetrating light filled everywhere. You can only see the light – no minister, no people, just light.

What would you think?

Well, some might think it as a trick by the worship committee members to create some sort of special effects for a contemporary service. But imagine, that out of this enormously brilliant light a powerful voice is heard.

Can you imagine if God really showed up at Leigh the way he did on that day at Mt. Tabor – no holds barred, nothing held back?

What would happen to our quick talk, or stubborn opinions, or determined agendas?

What would it do?

How would it change things?

The Bible says that it knocked the disciples to the ground. It even shut down the motor-mouth Peter. For now God spoke – “This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him.” It was not any representative of God -- like Moses or Elijah. It was God’s Son, the chosen One, the perfection, the completion, the way, the truth and the life.

And of this son God says – “Listen to Him.” This command carries the same meaning as a parent telling a child – “Now shut up and listen to me. Pay attention and obey.”

It’s terrifying. Isn’t it?

It’s overwhelming.

But this Son is the one to whom we pray and sing.

Of whom we speak.

Whose name we carry.

For whom we work.

Not one of his words is to be taken lightly, or fooled with, or treated casually.

Peter, James and John were overwhelmed.

Soon the mysterious moment is over.

The cloud vanishes.

The Sun shines again.

The birds sing.

In the valley below, the other disciples, the sick and the bereaved, the hungry and the poor, the untouchables and the marginalised are waiting. Their pain, their cry are heard once again.

The retreat is over.

The voice is heard.

The ministry begins again.

This story, albeit other worldly, is a fantastic story, and it appears at the lectionary at a very important time of our Christian journey. In three days’ time we will begin our Lenten journey which will lead us to Good Friday and Easter. And at the beginning of this special spiritual journey this story reminds us three important things of our Christian journey.

Firstly, it reminds us that we all need this mountain-top experience every day in our life.

For here at the mountain-top when we spend time in intimate and uninterrupted fellowship with God, we find rest, and nourish and replenish our body, mind and spirit.

Here we experience his transforming power in our life.

Here God tells us individually that you are not a cog in the wheel or just a social security number, you are precious, you are my beloved child. And we all need this affirmation.

And to have this mountain-top experience, you don’t need to go to a real mountain, it can happen in your own backyard, or at the corner of your own bed room, or at a quiet spot in or near your work place, where you can sit quietly and in a relaxed way read Bible, or a devotional book and pray and meditate, or just bask in the love of God.

This church can be the mountain-top. However we need to keep it in mind that a once-a-week trip to the mountain-top is not good enough, as we cannot have our whole week’s food in just one go. We need to make it a daily experience. In our busy life it’s hard to make some time for our soul, for our Lord, but that’s the best way to live with some degree of calm, quietness and peace.

The second important thing of our Christian journey is to “Listen to him.”

This phenomenon of the Divine Voice actually has a name in the Jewish tradition. It’s called *bat cole*, and it means "the daughter of a sound." Isn’t it an interesting metaphor?

There’s an interesting story in the Bible (I Kings 18) about Prophet Elijah whose presence was mentioned in today’s gospel reading. He was in a cave when the presence of God past him. We are told in the English translations of that story that Elijah hears a still, a small voice. That's the *bat cole*, the daughter of a sound.

In the baptism service which will take place shortly, we will hear Keith say to little Eli, “May the Lord open your ears to hear his voice.” We all have heard it said to us at our baptism that we would hear the *bat cole.*

Have you ever heard this voice?

Let me tell you a story about a three-year-old girl who was the only child in her family. Then her mom got pregnant, and this girl was very excited about having a baby in the house. The day came and the mom and dad went off to the hospital. A couple of days later the mom came home with a new baby brother. And the little girl was just delighted.

But after a couple of hours, the little girl told her parents that she wanted to be with the baby in the baby's room, alone, with the door shut. She was absolutely insistent about the door being shut. It’s a kind of weird thing, the parents thought. They knew she was a good little girl, but they also heard about sibling rivalry and all of this.

Then they remembered that they had recently installed an intercom system in preparation for the arrival of the new baby, and they realized that they could let their little girl do this, and if they heard the slightest weird thing happening, they could be in there in a flash.

So they let their little girl go into the room. They closed the door behind her. They raced to the other end of the intercom. They heard her footsteps move across the room. They imagined her now standing over the baby's crib, and then they heard her say to her two-day-old baby brother, "Tell me about God. I've almost forgotten."

I find it to be a haunting and evocative story, because it suggests that we come from God, and we are God’s beloved children, and when we are very young we remember that.

But as we grow up hearing the cacophony of the world around us we sort of progressively forget it. The words of the world get so deeply imprinted upon our psyches that it gets totally obliterated from our memory we no more feel that preciousness as beloved child of God. And if this sense of disconnection continues, then one day we lose that sense of connection altogether. But God never stops serenading to our ears, “You are my beloved child”.

Once a woman said to me that one evening she had an extraordinarily strong sense of the presence of Jesus in her room, and she said to Jesus, "Where have you been?" Then she heard a voice say back to her, "I never left you."

Have you ever heard God’s voice?

Don’t worry, I'm not asking for a show of hands. But it’s important for you to know that. Even if you've never heard such a voice, it's okay, because God also speaks to us in many other ways.

We can hear God’s voice in our dreams. We can hear God’s voice in what our Quaker friends refer to as leadings or prodding. We can hear God’s voice in the events of our lives, as noted Christian writer, Frederick Buechner, puts it: *Listen to your life. Listen to what happens to you, because it is through what happens to you that God speaks. It's in language that's not always easy to decipher, but it's there, powerfully, memorably, unforgettably.* (Excerpt from *Listening to Your Life : Daily Meditations with Frederick Buechner* by Frederick Buechner)

God speaks to us through Scripture, through meditations and prayers; through the liturgies. God also speaks to us through the people around us – not just those people who are vocal, but those who are voiceless and powerless, who live in the margins of the society. Their faint voice, even their silence is *bat cole,* the voice of God.

Do we hear the voice of God through the poor and the needy; through those who are languishing in remote detention centres; through those who are lonely and sad; those who are suffering in hospitals and mental health institutions?

“Listening to Him” is a great challenge for there are too many voices clamoring for our attention.Our listening to God’s voice, the *bat cole* is often affected by the cacophony of the media, the politicians and their spin doctors, our histories and experiences, our cultural biases and even our fears. And the truth be told, sometimes we are just selective in our listening to the voice of God.

But this story challenges us to listen with the ears of Jesus, listen to the voices of those for whom Jesus is concerned and for whom he speaks - the poor, the powerless, the marginalised, the women, the children, the asylum seekers, people of other cultures and those who are suffering.

I think this “Listening to God’s voice” is critically important for us as a church as we are in the middle of enormous change and looking for future directions. We have some gifted people who are trying to listen to God, and brainstorming to look at the future direction. But it is also necessary that we hear the “Voice of God” through the children and the youth of our church to whom the future actually belongs. Its not just two tall buildings and the church in the middle with the reinstalled spire that could be their future, but taking into account and implementing of what they think and aspire for the future of God’s church here in the heart of the Parramatta city, that’s important.

And the Bible has plenty of examples when God spoke and worked through children and young people. Samuel was a mere boy when God called him. David was a mere shepherd boy when God called him. And our Lord Jesus Christ was only twelve years old when he was having serious discussion with the elders of the temple. So it is important that we listen to God’s voice through our children and young people of what they think of their future here in this place, for in this enterprise, as the Bible says, “the young shall see visions and the older shall dream dreams.” It is a joint enterprise.

But “listening to him” is not the end of our Christian journey which brings me to the third point of my sermon. Right after the exotic mountain top experience, and listening to him, the disciples went down to the valley, and it was the beginning of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem.

This journey by no means was picnic for Jesus. In this journey as he taught and healed people, as he fed the hungry and befriended the outcastes, he also challenged the status quo of the religious practices. He unmasked the hypocrisy of the religious leaders. He challenged the religious and political establishment of their oppressive systems. And in doing all these he faced so much opposition, resistance and hatred that finally it led to his crucifixion. But that was not the end. Death couldn’t stop resurrection and new life. That’s where the journey led at the end.

Listening to Jesus means embarking on this journey with Jesus, carrying the cross, because this journey is at the very centre of our Christian life.

So friends, no matter how exotic our mountain-top experience could be, we have been asked to “listen to him” and follow him in his footsteps wherever we are.

We are called to be the ears, and eyes, and heart, and legs and hands of Jesus in this world.

We are called to uphold our belief in a better world and work for it.

We are called to question and challenge everything – especially when ‘the good is presented as evil’ and ‘evil presented as good’.

We are called to challenge individualism and promote community and solidarity.

We are called to challenge racism and ethnocentrism, homophobia and sexism, and promote openness and diversity.

We are called to challenge jokes, unkind language, slander, debasement, demonisation and dehumanisation of others.

We are called to challenge mere tolerance and indifference, but to create understanding and respect for others.

We are called to challenge propaganda and lies, especially about the poor, the vulnerable, the unemployed and the asylum seekers, and strive to build a spirit of truth.

We are called to challenge the hypocrisy and self-righteousness within the Church; and seek to build a church that truly reflects Christ.

None of these is easy to listen, let alone act upon them. And that’s why each one of us regularly needs that heavenly brush on the mountain top where we can be enthused and encouraged for our journey.

Friends, these three things: our mountain-top experience, our listening to God’s voice, and our service to the humanity, are the rhythms of our Christian life. Let us practice these three rhythms in the coming weeks during the Lent so it can become a pattern for the rest of our life, so that our life may always reflect the glory of Jesus Christ. May God bless us all. Amen.