**LISTEN TO JESUS**

February 10, 2019

Matthew 17:1-23

Key Verse 17:5 *“While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!”*

You know the expression, “*God gave you two ears and one mouth*”? It’s an expression to remind us we should spend more time listening than we spend talking. Most of us think of ourselves as good to great listeners but the truth of the matter is we are not as good at listening as we think. Even in regular conservations, we think of many things other than what we are actually talking about, merely waiting for the moment of our time to talk and not knowing that we just missed something very important. It’s far worse in our argumentative and divisive culture where we often live in our own echo chambers so the only voices we here are our own and the few people we 100% agree with. It’s even harder to listen to something you don’t want to hear. In today’s passage, Jesus teaches His disciples on the importance of listening, especially in such times, for when we truly listen and hold on to His words we may discover something truly amazing.

Look at verse 1, **“After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves.”** In last week’s passage, we witnessed Peter’s personal confession that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God (16:16). After many years of following Jesus, hearing every word of His wonderful teachings and bearing witness to so many lives changed through Jesus’ miracles, Peter could only come away with one conclusion; that Jesus was indeed the Christ, the Saviour whom all God’s people had been anticipating for so long. It seemed that after centuries of waiting, God was finally going to keep His promise by restoring Israel to its former glory and establishing Christ’s rule on earth that would last forever… only for their hope to crumble into dust as Jesus proclaimed how He was going to suffer and die. Furthermore, Jesus declared that if anyone of them wanted to truly be His disciple, they would have to deny themselves, take up their cross and follow Him. It was too much for Peter to bear, so much so that he even chastised Jesus for saying such a thing and earned a stinging rebuke in return. But what Peter displayed on the outside, the rest of the disciples felt inwardly as they become lost in their grief and despair as they faced the grim reality of life without Jesus. Many of you have had loved ones who passed away after prolonged battles with illness. The hardest part is often the time spent with them as their day draws near, trying to remain positive and strong while fending off the inevitability of death and our helplessness before it. Even though it is happening to someone else, we cannot but think of our own mortality, our own fate and how on earth will we carry on afterwards. The disciples were confronting a similar state of depression that they remained in for another six days. Yet out of His love and compassion, Jesus sought to end their sadness by giving them something greater to hold on to by taking His trusted disciples Peter, James and John to a high mountain.

In the Old Testament, prophets would often climb high mountains to meet with God. In Luke’s gospel, Jesus’ initial intention was for them to go up the mountain with Him to pray (Luke 9:28. In times of despair, Jesus response was always to meet God personally in prayer. Given this significant moment in His life and His earthly ministry, Jesus would turn to prayer more and more and He wanted the disciples to do the same. So if even Jesus prayed, how much more so should we pray? How often do we limit Jesus by offering half-hearted prayers or no prayers at all in our times of need? Prayer is our primary defence and weapon against fear, despair and all the ways the Devil uses to keep us from trusting and following God. I remember the very first Sunday I helped lead Praise and Worship back in Zimbabwe. Just about a hundred meters from my church, I was attacked by a dog (growing up, I had a major fear of dogs… I still get on edge whenever I see one off its leash). Although I was able to get to church without any physical harm, I was so shaken I couldn’t even touch the guitar let alone play. All I could do was offer a brief prayer “Lord, help me!” right before we were supposed to play and within moments I experienced one of the most calming feelings ever for when I took one breathe after that prayer, I felt all the shaking and the fear exit my entire body starting from my head down to my feet and out through my fingertips… needless to say, worship went quite well and I’m still at it to this day. Praying is essential to our lives and we as Christians should never leave home without it for the mightiest work of God comes through prayer. Through prayer we talk to God, feeling His presence among us, around us and within us. And as we shall see in the next few verses, not only can we experience Him in the most tangible way but sometimes, He even talks right back at us!

Let us read verses 2 and 3, **“There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.”** Right before their very eyes, Jesus transformed from the lowly human son of a carpenter and revealed His divinity before them in all His glorious, heavenly splendour. How magnificent a sight it must have been. From the radiance of His face to the brightness of His clothing, it felt like staring directly at the sun. And flanking Him on either side were two legendary servants of God, Moses and Elijah. But why these two in particular? It is because these two suffered greatly for the sake of God. For all his faithfulness in leading the Israelites through the wilderness for 40 years, Moses died never setting foot in the Promised Land, seeing it only from a distance and was buried in an unknown grave. And though God used Elijah to perform many great miracles, Elijah spent most of his life on the run in constant despair and fear for his life. Their lives on earth were full of struggles and hardships but now we see them gloriously raised to life in Jesus Christ. They too were sharing in Christ’s radiance as they spoke to Him about His death and departure (literally His *exodus*) as the complete fulfilment of both the law and the prophets (Luke 9:30-31). But why did Jesus choose this time, of all times, to reveal Himself in such a way? Think back to two weeks ago when the religious leaders demanded for a sign. Surely they and the entire nation would have believed in Jesus if He appeared before them in the same way. So why did Jesus seemingly “waste” this revelation on these three disciples?

Jesus wanted to give them hope. For the last week, all they could think of was Jesus dying and leaving them behind. They thought of how all the years of following and labouring for Jesus would be in vain. But in showing them this great vision, Jesus wanted them to have resurrection hope. Moses and Elijah had long since passed on from this world yet here they were, right in front of them as living proof that God is always faithful to those who serve and honour Him. Jesus wanted to place in their hearts and in their minds a lasting image of the great hope we all have in Him. When Jesus comes again, He will come in the same way as He appeared before them but this time, we too will share in His glory. We too shall shine like sun and we too shall dwell in His splendour forever. One lyric in a praise song we often sing goes, “*Christ in me, Christ in me, Christ in me the hope of glory. Be my everything*.” Let us hold onto this hope like it is everything. Let us not be discouraged by the trials of life but see them as passing shadows before the wondrous light that is our hope in Jesus.

How did the disciples respond to this? Look at verse 4, **“Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.””** The other Gospels describe Peter as not knowing what he was saying and while it is easy to make fun of him, I am touched by how he was expressing his genuine desire to be there on that mountain top. He was previewing what heaven will be like so why would he want to be anywhere else? Remember when we studied Noah’s rainbow and watched the video clip of “Double Rainbow Guy”? I feel Peter was in that same place, completely overwhelmed by the beauty and majesty of Christ and simply wanted to remain in His presence. Everything at the foot of the mountain and beyond it could not compare. Why go back to toiling, struggling, suffering and dying when you could stay on the mountain top forever? Yet as he continued speaking, God Himself would raise this experience to a whole new level.

Let us read the key verse for this passage, **“While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!”** (17:5). God echoed His word spoken right when Jesus was baptized to begin His earthly ministry (Matthew 3:17) but this time He added another command, “Listen to Him!” Why? All throughout the last month of sermons, we have seen how the disciples failed time and time again at listening to Jesus’ words, Jesus’ commands and Jesus’ promises. Now God Himself, who rarely speaks in the New Testament, spoke directly to the disciples as a reminder of whom Jesus is and what He wanted them to do.

Look at verse 5b again. Firstly, Jesus is God’s own Son, whom He loves. In Colossians 1:5, Apostle Paul says, “The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.” In this world, there seem many great figures we can choose to listen to. But the truth is that each person listens to whatever he or she wants to hear. And we reject what we do not want to hear for we would rather live in our own echo chamber. But Jesus’ disciples are those who confess Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. Jesus’ disciples listen to Him rather than our own feelings, emotions, ideas, past wounds and experiences. There are very dire consequences when we ignore and reject Jesus such as remaining in our sinful ways that will ultimately lead to our spiritual and physical death but listening to Jesus is the very beginning of true life and freedom. The more we do so, the more we come to know and understand ourselves. So whether is through listening to Him by reading the Bible, through spending time with Him in prayer, through songs and through so many other avenues, we need to tune in and listen. We are called not to simply hear His words but to absorb them, internalize them and live in accordance to them for living out God’s word is the truest sign of us listening to Jesus as the Living Word of God.

Secondly, God tells us to listen to Jesus because He is well pleased with Him. Of course, God has always been pleased with Jesus, His own Son in eternity. God was well pleased with him at this particular moment because Jesus resolutely walked toward Jerusalem to obey God’s plan and purpose through His death and resurrection. God wanted the disciples to accept His plan for world salvation with full trust and obedience as Jesus did. The same applies to us. Like the disciples, God does not simply want us to stay on the mountain but to take this new hope of Jesus in all His glory with us and ultimately share it with the whole world. God does not want us to run away from suffering and hardships but to participate in the sufferings of Christ for there is where we will find our lives in Him and experience true joy when His glory is revealed (1 Peter 4:13).

In fear of God and His holiness, the disciples fell facedown to the ground only for Jesus to encourage them by telling them to get up and not be afraid, a further illustration of how Jesus had indeed made God approachable for all mankind (6-8). While they could not understand all that happened, it did leave an indelible memory and became a source of great strength that lasted a lifetime. As Peter later testified as he approached his own death, “*For we did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. He received honor 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.” We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.*” (2 Peter 1:16-18)

However, their joy was short-lived for at the base of the mountain, a crowd had gathered as the remaining disciples had all failed to heal a boy of his demon possession. Imagine how the Nine must have felt. Not only were they left behind but they could not heal the boy even though Jesus had already given them power and authority to do so before (Luke 9:1). One after another, they all failed. It seemed all hope was lost. Jesus then rebuked the crowd as a perverse and unbelieving generation for their lack of faith and proceeded to heal the boy to the amazement of everyone there (17-18). Later on, when asked why they couldn’t drive out the demon, Jesus told them how it could come out by prayer (Mark 9:29) and further admonished His disciples for their lack of faith in verse 20, “**He replied, “Because you have so little faith. Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.”** By failing to pray, their lack of faith was exposed yet again. Our faith is directly tied in to how well we listen, practically apply and hold on to God’s word. When we believe in Jesus, which is described as faith as small as a mustard seed, nothing will be impossible for us. Faith is neither about how sincere you are in your belief nor how strong your willpower is. Faith is knowing the right object of your trust, Jesus and putting into action (James 2:17). When we absolutely believe in Jesus and His power as the Messiah, we can move any seemingly immovable mountain.

In conclusion, through Jesus’ glorious transfiguration we have a great hope in Him and look forward to the day it will be fully revealed in us. However, this can only be done if we listen closely to Jesus. Let us open our ears, our minds and our hearts to receive His words. Let us put them into practice all the days of lives and finally, let us grow in faith that moves mountains so we may be able to testify to how great and wonderful our God is to all who we cross paths with.