

The disciples may think they have found safety in Christ, a Messiah who is showing them a way to be “good” Jews, faithful to the law and the prophets in a way that fulfils them but also gives them a certain status and security in the eyes of others, and of themselves. This is the man to follow, who will take Jerusalem by storm, who will restore our faith and cleanse it of all the corruptions which any institution necessarily accrues through history. And Jesus warns them that it is not going to be so easy, that joining a “successful” church isn’t necessarily what it’s about, that there is a death to undergo not least to the illusions they have about how God “works”, for the paradigm they exist in is still very much one of God rewarding the just in the here-and-now, you can see that God is on our side because of all the “success” we have, bigger barns, mega churches, ‘civilisation’ and so on. Three times he will warn them of his impending Passion but also of his Resurrection from the dead but they will need something more to see them through their period of doubt and despair which his death as a common criminal will lead to, something more than that puts them in touch with the true nature of the God who is the beginning and end of their story, who may, like himself, seem to come and go but is there for them always. So Peter, James and John are given an experience of glory which quite overwhelms them, not just a peak experience of joy but of fear also of a God who goes far beyond our own expectation and understanding, something so totally other that all our vain attempts to capture it will be as nothing compared to its reality - all the great mystics know this and all the great theologians, put succinctly by Karl Rahner for example

“A theology that wishes to answer all questions clearly and thoroughly is guaranteed to miss its proper object”

(Dialogue: Conversations and Dialogues p216)

Or in the words of Dom Laurence Freeman

“Rather than giving answers and making rules, Jesus called people to experiential knowledge”

(p26 Jesus: The Teacher Within)

And this is what Jesus is offering his disciples here: an experience that they do not understand - encapsulated in Peter’s attempt to interpret and capture it in terms of tents or booths, a traditional Jewish practice - but an experience that will help them understand the even greater mystery of Resurrection which is to follow. Like the washing of the feet it’s not there to be understood yet but later, as they live in the light of the resurrection, they will come to understand, come to realise that they’ve been visited by both their maker and their redeemer and this was a God not confined by any tabernacle or Temple but found in relationship to the poor, the needy, the beloved - to the criminals on crosses like his own. It’s only this experience of death which gives us permission to speak of his Resurrection now.

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