

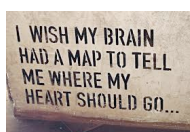
## “Come, follow me!”

### *Feeling Confused*

Passages: Isaiah 52:13-15  
Matthew 17:1-13

Lots of things can make us feel confused.

We’re confused about love and sexuality. We’re confused about morality and common values (what’s right and wrong). Lots of our confusion comes, for example, when our head and our heart go in opposite directions. Here’s a quote I found on the internet:



Another way that we can really get confused is when we try to figure out our purpose in life. Here’s another quote from the internet:

**MY LIFE HAS  
A SUPERB  
CAST BUT  
I CAN'T  
FIGURE OUT  
THE PLOT.**

In our modern world, confusion regularly arises because we find ourselves faced with a multitude of choices. Did you know that an average supermarket carries 285 varieties of cookies, 85 flavours and brands of juices, and 95 varieties of chips. There are 230 soup offerings, 120 different pasta sauces, 275 varieties of cereal, and 175 types of tea bags. Overall, supermarkets carry more than 30,000 items, and 20,000 new products are introduced each year. Of course, some choice is undoubtedly better than none, but when consumers are exposed to excessive choice, they get confused, stressed and frustrated!

Even when we are faced with only two choices, the stress can be intense, particularly when both choices seem to be equally valid. These are often called ***paradoxes***; two truths which tear us in opposite directions!

Kim and I went to see **Macbeth** (with Hugo Weaving) last Wednesday. It's a play filled with the tension of paradox! Early in the play, Macbeth is visited by three witches who predict that he will soon become King of Scotland. For this prediction to come true, however, he will have to become a murderer! And so, he cries out; "*This supernatural soliciting cannot be ill, cannot be good.*" Macbeth is tormented by this paradox! He's confused as to what he should do!

As we turn to today's text from Matthew 17, we see that the disciples are also filled with the confusion that comes from facing a paradox! Jesus has just announced that **He must go down to Jerusalem and die!** And, as if that's not enough to confuse them, Jesus then makes it clear that **they must also be ready to die!** Listen to Matthew 16:24.

***Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. <sup>25</sup> For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.***

Now, tell me-- Wouldn't you feel confused? After all, *you thought* that Jesus was the all-powerful Messiah who had come to liberate Israel from Roman occupation and live forever! But now He tells you that all He has to offer is **death**... first His, then yours! Wouldn't you feel confused?

This is what I was saying to you last week. Lying at the heart of the disciples' confusion is *a paradox*, generated by the conflict between two, equally-valid, types of theology: the *theology of divine glory* and the *theology of divine suffering*.

- The **theology of glory** says that whatever God determines to do will be triumphant...because God is God! As God, He must always be victorious! He will defeat His enemies! He will overcome every challenge to His sovereign rule!
- The **theology of divine suffering**, however, says something quite different. It says that God will not (cannot) stay aloof/distant from His creatures, because "God is love". True love means that God must make Himself vulnerable, even to the point of entering our fallen world and suffering and dying with us...and for us!

Now can you see why a serious case of *confusion* was building in the minds of the disciples? On the surface, it would appear that these two theologies could never be united! But Jesus is insisting otherwise! And so, the disciples find themselves struggling to comprehend this *paradox*! They are confused!

Of course, Jesus knows they're confused! And that's why, at the start of chapter 17, Jesus takes Peter, James and John up on a mountain with Him.

***After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. <sup>2</sup> There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. <sup>3</sup> Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.***

Why did Jesus take these three men up on a mountain? It's simple, really! This little trip was designed to help them sort out their confusion *by giving them a better grip on this paradox of faith.*

And so, the first thing that Jesus does is to show them His glory! He appears as God's chosen One, bathed in heavenly light and radiating a divine aura. He is also flanked by two of Israel's greatest prophets, Moses and Elijah, who appear to be honouring Jesus as their superior. What this heavenly scene does for the disciples is to reinforce what they've already believed about Jesus—that He is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God!

It's the "theology of glory" that the disciples most easily appreciate! Indeed, Peter is so comfortable with this type of theology that he wants to build three shelters to immortalise the experience, as if God's glory could be captured or contained.

***<sup>4</sup> 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."***

Notice how, at this precise moment, God, the Father, interrupts Peter's fanciful suggestion.

***<sup>5</sup> 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!"***

The Father is saying two, very profound, things here:

**First, He's reiterating His pleasure in His Son.** Notice that these are the exact same words which were uttered back in Matthew 3, when God's voice spoke from heaven at Jesus' baptism two years earlier. This was how the **first phase** of Jesus' ministry got started! God, the Father, was sending His Son out into ministry with His blessing—***"This is My Son, whom I love."***

So, now, as the **second phase** of Jesus' ministry gets underway (as Jesus sets His face towards Jerusalem to suffer and die), the Father repeats His divine commission and approval. ***"This is My Son, whom I love."*** These

words are particularly intended for the three disciples to hear! God, the Father is publicly endorsing Jesus' decision to go to Jerusalem! The Messiah and Son of God is doing exactly what the Father has wanted. Indeed, the Father is well-pleased!

**Second**, in case they still don't get it, the voice from heaven directly tells the three disciples to **"Listen to him!"** It's as if the Father is getting quite irritated by the fact that the disciples hadn't been listening to their Master! Of course, this begs the question; *"What had Jesus been saying to them that they were not listening to?"* Verse 21 of chapter 16 tells us!

***"From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life."***

Jesus had been explaining to them why He needed to go down to Jerusalem. But they weren't listening! That's why Jesus took them up on the mountain— He took them up there (1) to show them His glory, and (2) to reinforce the need for suffering; two theologies that, despite the confusion they may cause, must be held together!

Let's continue with the story, from **verse 9**.

***<sup>9</sup> As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, "Don't tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."<sup>10</sup> The disciples asked him, "Why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?"***

This part of the story of the transfiguration is often skipped. We skip it because we fail to understand what's at the heart of this discussion between Jesus and His disciples. In my mind, however, it's simply a continuation of their internal struggle to hold the ***theology of glory*** and the ***theology of divine suffering*** together, in dynamic tension!

That's why, as they are coming down the mountain, the disciples ask a question about Elijah. ***"Why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?"*** You see, the last of the Old Testament prophets (Malachi), had prophesied that, in preparation for the coming of Messiah, the prophet Elijah would first return to Israel. (Malachi 4:5-6)

***<sup>5</sup> "See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. <sup>6</sup> He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction."***

In essence, these verses promoted a **“theology of glory”**! According to Malachi, God was going to come in power and glory to either *convert* or *destroy*. There would be no middle ground!

But listen to how Jesus responds to this reference concerning Elijah’s return.

***<sup>11</sup> Jesus replied, “To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. <sup>12</sup> But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.”***

Can you see how Jesus deliberately moves them from glory to suffering? Jesus is telling them that, although the prophecy in Malachi may have evoked a strong image of glory, the reality is quite different. Elijah has, in fact, already come (in the person of John the Baptist), and instead of honouring him... instead of *lifting up his head in glory...*, they *beheaded* him! **Only a theology of divine suffering can make sense of something so utterly tragic as this!**

***<sup>13</sup> Then the disciples understood that he was talking to them about John the Baptist.***

It took a while, but a simple trek up on a mountain has given these three disciples an insight into the very heart of God...into the tension that God feels between **the perfect brightness of His untarnished glory** and **the bitter agony of His love which inevitably leads to suffering**. They are, in effect, the two sides of the same coin. They are the two faces of God!

Of course, they can often leave us feeling confused! But unless we see them both, we cannot truly know the nature of God!

And this leads us to make one further observation about today’s text—namely, that **even Jesus, Himself, must have felt a certain degree of this same confusion!**

As we said earlier, it becomes pretty obvious that Jesus took His three closest disciples up on the mountain **to help them** better grasp the tension between glory and suffering. But, if we are to be true to the text, we must also say that He took these friends up on the mountain **to help Him** as well! If you read the parallel passage to this story in Luke 9, it says that Jesus **“... took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray.”** Now, think about it: Whenever Jesus went off somewhere to pray, it was always because He

either had a key decision to make (like the choice of his 12 disciples), or because He had come to an important cross-road in His life. Considering that Jesus had just declared that was now *“turning His face to Jerusalem”*, it’s obvious that He wanted to pray *to hear the Father’s voice in confirmation of this new direction that He was taking!* Jesus was looking for reassurance and greater clarity in the midst of His own **confusion!**

There’s another detail of the story which also points to Jesus’ confusion. As you may recall, this entire story seems to take place at night! It may sound like an odd time to be up on a mountain, but the darkness that surrounds Jesus (and His disciples) acts as a *metaphor* for the confusion that was engulfing Him. It was, both literally and figuratively, getting harder for Jesus to see the way ahead.

His ‘Transfiguration’, then, becomes a powerful image of how, in prayer, the Father breaks through His confusion and shines His light of clarity and truth! Indeed, the light of the Father seems to embrace the Son as a bright cloud envelopes the mountaintop and a voice is heard from heaven saying, ***“This is My Son, whom I love; with him I am well-pleased!”*** Jesus is not only reaffirmed as God’s Son, but His face now shines with a renewed acceptance of His divine calling and mission as the *Lamb of God!*

Are there lessons for us to learn here? I believe so!

1. If Jesus felt confused, then, surely, it’s OK for us to feel it, too!  
Moreover, if Jesus was *willing to face* the darkness that comes with confusion and was *willing to enter* into it, then maybe we should do this, too! Perhaps it’s time to realise that the darkness of confusion is not really something of which we need to be afraid!
2. If Jesus found that *going away somewhere to pray* was the best way to calm His confusion, then we should consider this, too!
3. Furthermore, if Jesus deliberate took three of His closest friends with Him as he tried to sort out His situation, then surely, this would be good for us, too!

Of course, we must always remember that **our levels of confusion** will never come close to **the level of confusion that Jesus must have suffered**, as He

turned His face towards Jerusalem! Indeed, despite the relief that came from this mountaintop experience, we can only imagine that Jesus' confusion would have *exponentially increased* with every step He made towards Jerusalem... coming to a climax on another mountain, known as **the Mount of Olives!**

- There, He would join once more with His friends.
- There, he would pray to His Father, *“Father, if it be your will, take this cup from Me! But, not my will, but Yours be done!”* .
- There, His prayers would be mixed with such confusion that drops of sweat would turn to blood.
- And there, on that mountain, only one light would shine for Him—the light of a torch held aloft by the soldiers who would bind Him, and beat Him...and on the next day, crucify Him.

Was Jesus confused? **You can be sure He was!** From the cross, don't we hear him ask that most awful question; *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”*

This, my friends, is the ultimate tension...the gruelling paradox...of our faith; a paradox that will be experienced whenever and wherever the **theology of glory** meets with the **theology of divine suffering!**

And, you know what? *All we can do is hold on!* I say that because, *one day, the triumph of Christ's resurrection will force a final truce between these two theologies*,...as the nail-holes and wounded side of our Risen Lord are finally healed...and the cross is raised-up as symbol of His eternal victory over suffering and death.

Revelation 21:4-- **‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’**

Let's pray.