

## **The Transfiguration**

By Rev Canon Lucy Murdoch

Sermon at St Richard's Church Heathfield - Parish Communion 06.08.17  
Dan 7. 9-10, 13-14; 2 Peter 1. 16-19; Luke 9. 28 – 36

They [Moses and Elijah] appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.

Mountains and mountain tops! My mountaineering has been limited to hills like the Downs, the Weald or the sand dunes of Camber! But even such gentle slopes as these can take one's breath away with the new wonder that is revealed when you reach the summit. So it's no surprise to read and hear great mountaineers describe the extraordinary experience of finally reaching a real mountain summit, and that sometimes they may feel themselves drawn into the mystery of God.

Mountain tops are a frequent feature throughout the Bible, a motif almost. Doubtless in the intense heat of the Middle East they were cool pinnacles, places to which one could withdraw from the noise of the world and the dust of the plains, places where people, in the swirling clouds and winds, encountered the glory, the majesty, the still small voice of God.

Moses and Elijah, who figure in this gospel passage, each had their own mountain top experience.

Moses communes with God on Mount Sinai. Here, in the clouds which the Israelites called '**the glory of the Lord**', he meets with God to be told of the Covenant – an agreement of love and obedience between God and his chosen people. When Moses descends from the mountain, he discovers the hard reality of this people's disobedience as they worship the golden calf. But he does not give up, and after justice has been done, he returns to the mountain and to God asking him to either forgive the people or '**blot me out of the book that you have written.**' We see in Moses the constant pattern of turning to God in faith, asking for guidance, his commands, and then descending the mountainside from the glory of God with that glory still shining in his face, to wrestle again with the reality of the world, of God's people.

And so to Elijah who has run a long way in fear to Mount Horeb. Here he meets with the Lord. He tells God that he is the only prophet left, he is alone facing death. Then follows the well-known story when Elijah is commanded to '**Go out and stand on the mountainside in the presence of the Lord**'. But he remains cowering in his cave in the face of the wind, the earthquake and then the fire before he hears '**a gentle whisper**', and only then does he emerge, veiling his face in the presence of the Lord. This is the beginning of his journey back, the understanding that God is with him, as are many other prophets, and that this is the reality to be met with courage, not a spectre of fear to be run away from. The whisper of God has filled him with the Spirit. Like Moses, he follows God's command.

And so on to the mount of the Transfiguration, probably Mount Hermon. About eight days earlier Peter had declared to Jesus that he, Jesus, was the Messiah. But Jesus had responded by swearing the disciples to secrecy about his identity, and then speaking of his future suffering and death.

Now Jesus climbs the peaceful slopes of the mountainside with Peter and John and James. He is probably very aware of their confusion and fear following his warning of what lies ahead, and so wants to share this time of glory with them, his closest friends. Significantly, when that moment comes, Elijah the prophet and Moses the lawgiver, are also with him.

Needless to say it is the passionate, impulsive Peter who bursts out ecstatically with his longing to hold onto this moment for ever by building shelters for Jesus and the two men with him. But he is overtaken by the cloud of God's glory, and the voice of God '**This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!**'

Jesus comes down from the mountain top and sets his face resolutely towards Jerusalem – he leaves behind the glory and faces the reality of what he is being asked to do – to bear the physical, mental and spiritual anguish of the Cross.

What do these stories of mountain tops, then, tell us today?

There is a last mountain top story I would like to share with you. A few years ago a Methodist minister was travelling in Peru, and he was taken up a mountain, reaching the summit as dawn broke. The sight of the sunrise was out of this world, the sky flamed with red, orange, primrose, silver – overwhelming. As he returned to their base he vowed that the next morning, his last opportunity, he must return to take a photograph of such an incredible sight.

So again the next day, he climbed to the summit, but this time the sky was overcast and grey with no sun to be seen. Bitterly disappointed he started down again, but then with no sun in his eyes, he was able to look into the valley below where he saw a village. He returned that way and was appalled at the poverty and the suffering he saw around him. At that moment he knew that this was what God wanted him to see – the reality of life beneath the mountain top. He prayed for courage to carry out God's will, and made the life-changing decision to leave home, in order to give his life to the poor in Peru.

We are all given glimpses of God's glory, and perhaps, like Peter, long to stay in that glory – for time to stand still. But the message is clear that we too have to come down the mountainside, to turn from looking up at God's glory, to looking down at the reality.

Earlier, when Jesus had warned his disciples of the dark days ahead, he also said to them, **'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it'**.

Today, we are reminded again to ask God to help us to walk the way of the cross, to help us to discern what he wants us to do, however small, or however painful – how to cope with it, to wrestle with it. And we have the reassurance that as we do, we are not alone, that Jesus is at our side, together with all those others who seek this path, of ages past and today. Amen