



Sermon preached by Revd Dr Robert Pope on 15th February 2026

Readings: Exodus 24:12-18; 2 Peter 1:16; Matthew 7:1-9

Think on these words from the Gospel according to Matthew: ‘A voice came from the cloud, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him”’.

Some years ago, one of my colleagues came to work expressing grave concern that his son had decided he wanted to climb Mount Everest. As it developed, it became a fascinating story, and I am sure you are aware of the kind of stages someone has to go through. The young man trained for months and then went out to the Himalayas in order to begin altitude training which involved climbing to a higher base camp, spending a few days there and then returning to a lower altitude, gradually climbing up through the base camps until they reached the highest one. They waited there for a few days partly because the weather was bad. Finally, the weather cleared and they climbed the rest of the mountain to the top of the world. After months and months of training and preparation, they were allowed three minutes on the summit before they had to begin their descent.

My colleague – and his family, including the son – were (and remain) Pentecostal Christians. For his son, being at the top of the world, seeing the Himalayas descending below in all their splendour and majesty, standing higher than any other point on earth, feeling that he touched the sky itself, this was a true mountain top experience. The sense of God’s majesty and yet gentle presence was strong. It was for him to be a defining moment, not merely one that he would never forget, but one that would form him for the rest of his life.

We heard about two mountain top experiences, first from the book of Exodus, and then from the story of Jesus himself, from the Gospel according to Matthew. The parallels between the story of Moses on Mount Sinai and the much briefer story of Jesus’ transfiguration are striking and deliberate.

Jesus took Peter, James and John with him up to the top of what the reading says was ‘a high mountain’. The author is keen to point out that they were ‘by themselves’. They were alone. There was no further or wider company. I wonder how the three disciples felt? Perhaps they felt good to have been selected to accompany Jesus on the journey. Perhaps they enjoyed walking up into the mountains, perhaps they anticipated the feeling of achievement or even the views they would witness from the summit (without being able to anticipate what in fact they saw). Perhaps they felt dejected that Jesus wanted them to go with him. Climbing mountains is hard work, after all. Maybe they had sore and aching limbs as a result. Whatever they anticipated, they went with him. And what a sight they saw! Jesus, the reading tells us, was ‘transfigured’ before them. The word doesn’t simply mean changed or transformed into something else. It bears the sense that the transformation is to something more beautiful, or more elevated and the reading tries to capture that by saying ‘his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became bright as light’. If that was not enough, the disciples then saw Moses and Elijah, who had suddenly appeared, and they were talking with Jesus.

Both Moses and Elijah are associated with experiences on the mountain tops. Moses climbed Mount Sinai and spoke with God. He descended carrying the tablets of the Law, the Ten Commandments. And his face was shining, because he had been in the presence of the Holy God. Moses had been in the presence of God. He physically and figuratively had a mountain-top experience. And it left a mark. Not aching limbs, but a shining face, a face that reflected the glory of God. It caused fear among the people, and so, the book of Exodus tells us, he covered his face and hid it from his fellow Israelites. In some ways his shining face demonstrated to the people his authority. This is the way of telling the people

'listen to him' and Moses offered to the people God's laws and told them how to keep them in a way which would please God. The mountain top experience is associated with authority given to Moses. And the people should follow.

Elijah is associated with the contest with the prophets of Ba'al on the top of Mount Carmel. The prophets of Ba'al called on their idol to light the offering but nothing happens. Elijah called on God to light the offering and it was consumed in a fire coming from heaven. Later he fled to the wilderness and met God on Mount Horeb – another name for Mount Sinai. 'What are you doing here?' God provocatively asked him, and he was sent back with a particular mission. Again these experiences are associated with the divine commission and therefore divine authority that Elijah had; they constitute another way of telling the people 'listen to him'. The mountain top experience is associated with authority given to Elijah. And the people should follow.

Moses represents the giving of the Law to the people of Israel. The Law was the authoritative revelation of God's will and purpose to his people. Moses was considered important in Israel because he had been the one called by God at the burning bush to lead the people out of Egypt and into the promised land. And it was he who had revealed to them God's covenant, what was needed for it to be clear that God was their God and they were his people. Moses was a figure much-revered in Israel – and Peter, John and James would have known that.

Elijah represents the prophets, those remarkable individuals called of God to speak words of truth to power, to call the people to repent and live up to the covenant, to reestablish that God is their God and they were God's people. Indeed, Elijah was considered to be the greatest of the prophets. For the story that came down to the people of Israel was that Elijah had not died but been taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire. This in turn gave rise to the belief that Elijah would return before the Messiah would come. We won't explore it now, but this is why John the Baptist was important and also why, when Jesus asks at Caesarea Philippi 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?', one of the answers is 'Elijah'. Elijah was a figure much revered in Israel – and Peter, John and James would have known that.

Given the importance of Moses and Elijah, what response would be appropriate? Peter looked for permanence. Let's stay here in this moment and keep the big cheese with us. Let's build a tent, a tabernacle – perhaps we would say let's build a chapel or a church – so we can keep them where we can see them and we can keep them in place for when we might need them; we can keep them enclosed – boxed in – we can keep an eye on them, we can keep them under control. But such an idea was rejected by the turn of events. All was suddenly covered in a bright cloud, and a voice proclaimed 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!' *Listen to him.*

There is no record in Matthew's account of the cloud clearing (though I guess it must have done). But the disciples' response is perhaps natural: they fell to the ground, overcome with fear. And Jesus came to them and said 'Get up and do not be afraid'. *Listen to him.* When they opened their eyes, only Jesus was left. The message is clear. Moses and Elijah are important – do not doubt that – for they are seen speaking with Jesus. But then they are gone. Listen to Jesus does not mean that the law and the prophets are worthless. Listen to Jesus means that he is the fulfilment of the law and the prophets. He is not just the one bringing the tablets of the law, he is not just the giver of a message, he is not the mediator between us and God, *he is the message.* We listen to him, but we don't just listen. We follow.

All this was affirmed on the top of the mountain. For the three disciples it was a defining moment, and it needed to be. Remember that when Jesus, Peter, John and James reach the bottom of the mountain they find the other disciples unable to do anything about the poor child with epilepsy. Back down to earth with a bump!

Remembering the mountain top experience is important for us all. That moment of transcendence, that moment of insight, that moment of receiving a higher perspective all becomes formative. It is not only a memory of a great experience but something that sustains in the future – something that sustains

when you go back down the mountain (physically and metaphorically) and return to the hardships, the difficulties, the pain, blood, sweat and tears of life.

We need to hold on to these mountain top experiences. We hear almost daily of increasing instability in the world; we see an inability to agree that there is such a thing as truth; we see the world buckling under the arbitrary and capricious decisions of certain very rich people, acting in their own interests, as they become richer and the poorer become poorer; we see wealth being equated with power in a godless world devoid of any other values or principles. It is a world in which it is difficult to be optimistic. But hope remains.

Hope, biblically, is the expectation of a future resting on God's promises. The greater reality, biblically, is not our empirical experience; what goes on around us, what goes on in the world, but the reality with which we are confronted by God, God's address to us, God's revelation to us, God's ways and thoughts beyond our own. This confrontation, this address, this revelation takes the form not just of critique or judgment of the present situation, but also of promise that God will bring God's will to pass and God's kingdom will truly be established in its fullness. This confrontation, this address, this revelation takes the form of a person. The one who raised the poor, fed the hungry, healed the sick; the one who spoke of a kingdom where the first are last and the last are first; the one who spoke of love – love of God and love of neighbour, love of enemy, love even as he has loved – as the fulfilment of God's Law; the one who suffered a horrific death at the hands of the powers, the principalities and the forces most threatened by his picture of a topsy-turvy world in which human beings are reconciled to God, to each other, and to the earth, that all might flourish; the one who could not be silenced in such a wicked act but who returned because this was no subtle philosopher or great preacher but the very revelation of God who shows us the way and rescues us from what is false. *Listen to him.*

Jesus leads us in hopeful living because he is the one who exposed the emptiness of human promises, he is the one who unearths the lies on which power and empire are built, he is the one who speaks truth – God's truth – to power. And if we listen to him, then we will hear of the kingdom where the blind have sight restored, the lame walk again and the meek inherit the earth. In short, the word of God offers a beacon of hope even when we feel helpless about what is going on.

And because we hear it will come, then we can have real hope, we can live hopefully. What helps us to do this? Our reading from the Second Letter of Peter shows how in the earliest days of the Church it was a recollection of such a mountain top event that spurs on the life and witness of the church. 'We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain'. What empowered the early followers of Jesus? Keep the Law, hear the Prophets but *listen* to God's Son. *Listen to him.*

These mountain top experiences, recalling for ourselves moments of deep spiritual renewal, of deep-seated joy, remembering again the first time we heard the gospel and knew it to be true for us too; they help us to see light when there only seems to be darkness, hope when there only seems to be despair, life when there only seems to be death. And so today hear those words again! 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him'. 'For in him was life, and his life was the light of all people. And the light shines in the darkness and the darkness will never overcome it'.

May it always be so.

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