



Sermon preached by Dr Augur Pearce on 19th February 2023

Readings: Matthew 17:1-9; Exodus 24:12-18; II Peter 1:16-21

A lot of important things in the Biblical story happen at the top of mountains. To name some of the most significant, we might think of Ararat, from where humanity spread over the earth after Noah's family survived the Flood. Or of Mount Moriah, where Abraham proved his faith in his willingness to sacrifice the son in whom he placed his hope: Moriah, which some Jewish tradition identifies with Mount Zion, site of the later Jerusalem Temple.

Or we might think of Mount Sinai, elsewhere called Horeb, where God spoke to Moses and gave him the Commandments which were to be Israel's side of the Covenant, the core of the Torah. Some of Jesus' most comprehensive teaching was also – according to one account – delivered on a mountain. And our Gospel today places the Transfiguration on 'a high mountain apart'.

Mountains are places of encounter. It takes effort and courage to climb them. Not everyone makes that effort, so one is not usually surrounded by crowds. Sometimes one can be quite alone, or only with those who are closest to one. The view may perhaps be one's reward – given daylight and the right weather conditions, one can see further from a mountain-top than anywhere else. One sees the world in perspective, one can put familiar everyday places into context. And if one is open to God, one may perhaps find that the summit is a place to speak to and experience him, more easily than one can in the midst of all the world's usual distractions.

On Abraham's mountain he was met by the Angel of the Lord who told him not, after all, to sacrifice Isaac, and instead promised him the great family who would be a blessing to all nations. Both Moses and Elijah encountered God on Sinai: for it was not only the place where Moses received the Law, but also the place to which Elijah fled after evoking the wrath of the wicked Queen Jezebel, where he heard the 'still small voice' and was given new commissions to continue his prophetic ministry. So it was Peter, James and John who shared in our latest mountain-peak experience. They saw their friend and companion, the teacher and leader of their wandering group, revealed in brightness, in dialogue with the greatest names of Israel, and heard him described in a way not even Moses had ever been described.

Yet encountering God does not require a mountain top. The vision passed and the disciples went back down the mountain. They saw Jesus pray back in the lowlands. And we know, as no doubt they knew, that there are many ways to contact the divine. Perhaps after Jesus' Ascension, the experience they shared may have lent new meaning to the promise they had heard from him soon afterwards, 'When two or three gather in my name, there am I in the midst of them'.

Let's now turn our attention to another question. What was going on down below, during such mountain-top events?

If we ask that in relation to Mount Ararat, and take the story of the Flood literally, the answer would be nothing. Everybody else had been drowned by the time Noah left the Ark and heard God promise never to do that again.

Turning to the encounters on Sinai, the answers are also pretty depressing. Before going up the mountain, we heard Moses say to the Israelites 'Wait here for us, until we come to you again.'

Aaron and Hur are with you; [whoever has a dispute may] go to them.’ So to what use did Aaron and the people put the waiting time? Oh yes; let’s make a golden calf and worship that, in case Moses never returns. Now there’s an idea for the Elders’ Meeting during Nigel’s sabbatical. But it really wasn’t a good idea, and I’m not suggesting it now.

Equally, whilst Elijah was standing outside the mountainside cave listening to the still small voice, back home Jezebel was plotting revenge for his elimination of Baalite worship, and Benhadad of Syria was preparing a war of aggression. And whilst the three privileged disciples were witnessing the Transfiguration, yet another mentally-ill man was being brought to their colleagues; all attempts to cure his condition were proving fruitless. At the same time, administrators of the Temple tax were planning a new device to trick Jesus into controversial answers and so to undermine his message.

Encounters with God, in other words, do not bring an end to human loss or human error, nor to human sin and human suffering. Indeed the view from the mountain-top of faith may actually be a clearer vision of all that is wrong with our world. We know that Russian missiles are still flying, that China’s Uigurs remain in reindoctrination camps, that gay people are still being murdered by the régime in Iran, that the forests of South America continue to shrink. We know this is still a world of hunger, of poverty, of disease, some of it felt here in our own country, and that all the goodwill humankind has to offer is not enough to solve all its problems. Even as we meet to glorify and learn more about God, we know religion itself can be perverted to serve wrong ends.

Yet neither do the world’s woes cancel out the value of the mountain-top. The author of the Second Letter of Peter saw in the Transfiguration experience a visible confirmation of what the earlier scriptures had foretold, and of Jesus’ message with its promise of God’s Kingdom. Moses’ leadership, the prophets’ witness, the disciples’ readiness to carry on their work were all the better for the time they had spent focussed on God’s majesty, otherness and power. May we likewise continue to be led from prayer to action, and from action to prayer.

Amen.