

Sunday 11th February – The Mountain Top

2 Kings 2:1-12.

2 Corinthians 4:3-6.

Mark 9:2-9.

Kate and I often go walking, and one of the reasons is that we love the amazing views one finds. There's something very satisfying about getting to the top of a hill or mountain and seeing the vista below; the land and sea and the sky stretching out in front of you. Particularly on a blue sky sunny and clear day. A real top of the world feeling that's hard to beat.

A few years ago we were on a small Scottish island and climbed to the highest point on the island. It was one of those days where the weather changes as quickly as the terrain, and we plodded on over moorland, rock outcrop, and alongside lochans, through wind and rain and finally up a steep and narrow track to reach the summit in glorious sunshine. And what a summit. We could see across to the Isle of Skye, and back across to the mainland. Spotting paths where we had walked on previous holidays, and trying to identify the hills and bays in the distance from the map. And then we looked down into a valley and saw a golden eagle below us. Soaring on the thermals, giving a wonderful demonstration of swooping and gliding, before being chased off (yes really) by a raven. But however wonderful the sight of the bird and the panorama might have been, however much they enhanced the cheese and pickle sandwiches we had brought for our lunch, we knew we had to leave them (the views, not the sandwiches) and get on with the day, taking with us the memories and the pictures.

And its occasional and special events like that that help me in life. Looking back on the wonder of seeing God's creation stretched out, the joy of seeing the eagle soar, the majesty of the mountains or in different circumstances, the joy of a family gathering, helps me in the more mundane things of life; helps me live day to day. I need those moments of clarity, those moments of vision, those moments of joy to sustain me.

And mountains or hills are important places in the Bible.

Think Mount Sinai (also known as Mount Horeb) – the place that Moses encountered God in the burning bush, and later where he received the commandments from God. The place where Elijah met God in the still small voice. Mount Carmel where God, through the prophet Elijah, took on the prophets of Baal. Mount Moriah where Abraham took the boy Isaac to be sacrificed before being stopped by God; Mount Zion where Solomon built the temple. And in the New

Testament, the mount from which Jesus spoke the sermon on the mount; the Mount of Olives where Jesus often went to pray, and from where he ascended into heaven. And of course Mount Tabor – thought to be the place of the transfiguration which we heard about this morning.

Places where God was encountered in special and life changing ways. We might call them thin places – places where earth and heaven almost meet.

In our gospel reading today we have an account of a dramatic encounter on a mountain top. Peter, James and John went with Jesus up a high mountain. When they arrived they had a vision of Jesus in glory – transfigured into his heavenly glorious appearance, shining as bright as the sun. And alongside him were Moses and Elijah. Moses representing the Law, and Elijah the prophets.

Peter could hardly control himself. He is so wrapped up in the moment – in what he could see and what he was experiencing – that it seems he wants to hang on to it for ever. Let us make dwellings, or tents or booths as some translations say. In other words, let us turn this vision into a permanent experience. Let us live in this glorious other worldly state for ever. Let us not go back to reality. This is all too wonderful.

But it doesn't work like that. Such moments are granted to us because they will help us as we live, not to be our lives themselves. Peter's trance like state was blown away by the words from heaven. God himself speaking into the vision. This is my Son, the beloved – listen to him! And then the vision melted away; Moses and Elijah could no longer be seen; Jesus was alone there, no longer in his glory.

But the words hung in the air. This is my Son. The Beloved. This is the Messiah – continuing the work of Moses and of Elijah. You have seen a vision of his glory – which one day will be revealed to the whole world. This is my son. Listen to him.

This passage in Mark, together with the preceding incident when Peter makes his great declaration of Jesus as the Messiah at Caesarea Philippi – form the pivotal point in the gospel. Up till then we have the account of Jesus the healer, Jesus the miracle worker, Jesus the teacher. We have people flocking to hear him and see him. We have the beginnings of a joyful movement. But now, with his Messiahship confirmed, and with the revelation that this Messiah would not be a conquering hero but would have to suffer and die, the gospel plays in a different key.

The road to Jerusalem begins. The story from here is marked by teaching about Jesus' impending death; the entry into Jerusalem, the clearing of the temple, the growing opposition, the words about the temple destruction, the plot, the last

supper, the betrayal, the trial and the crucifixion. The mountaintop experience seems a long time ago now.

And yet, it was that experience – and others like it no doubt – that sustained the disciples through the hard times. As the opposition grew, as they began to realise that Jesus would have to die; as they pondered their own futures; they no doubt looked back on that vision of glory. Remembered the feelings and the exhilaration that were theirs. Recalled the voice from heaven. Understood that what they saw now – the pain and the opposition and the suffering – wasn't the whole story. There was and would always be a more glorious side.

And the same for us too. We value not only the physical and literal mountain top experiences with their views, but also the spiritual ones with their insights.

Times when we feel especially close to God. Times when prayer and worship seem all too easy. Moments when God just seems to be here alongside us. Perhaps in a cathedral or church building, maybe here where you regularly worship; maybe at home with your family, perhaps alone on a walk or a hilltop or in the words of the Bible or a poem or a hymn, perhaps in the mystery and majesty of a piece of art or music. Whatever and wherever I am sure we have all had those special moments – those mountaintop experiences.

But they don't last forever. Indeed they cannot.

There will also be the low times. Times when it feels like we are stuck in a bog. Times where we cannot see a way forward; times when it all seems too hard; times where God seems to be nowhere.

And its at times like these that we, like Peter and James and John, are able to draw on the memories of the special mountain top times to carry us through and to enable us to be aware of God again. Because God is still there.

Life can't be all mountain top experiences, but the memories of them can help us through the mundane times, the ordinary times. Life is a journey; our Christian lives are a spiritual journey; there will be ups and downs, there will be highs and lows. God gives us those special times to keep us going through the bad times, but he also promises to be with us always, alongside us, in front and behind. And one way we can be more aware of his presence is to spend time with him each day. Perhaps this Lent – beginning of course on Wednesday – might be an opportunity to do that. And maybe our daily readings would be a place to start.