

Sunday 23rd February

Exodus 24:12-end

2 Peter 1:16-end

Matthew 17:1-9

As many of you know, we like to take our Holidays in Scotland – often travelling to the Western Isles. Enjoying the scenery and the peace and quiet. Occasionally climbing hills (the small ones!) and enjoying the views. I recall one particular occasion on the island of Raasay when we climbed to the highest point of the island and could see the panorama spread out all around us. It was one of those glorious days when you could see for miles. The isle of Skye, out as far as the outer Hebrides, across to the mainland picking out the places we had been and the paths we had walked. Truly magical.

And then back down to reality. Back down to the lowland, the valley, the ordinariness of life.

Our gospel reading today is the story of the transfiguration when Jesus took his three closest disciples - Peter, James and John - up a mountain to pray.

And while they were praying, Jesus changed in appearance. His face and clothes shone dazzling white, he was shining with the glory of god.

And he was joined by Moses and Elijah – representing the law and the prophets - two others who had been in the very presence of God. (we heard about Moses in the OT reading and we may recall the stories of Elijah the great prophet)

And the disciples were amazed at the glory. Amazed not like we were at the views around, but at what they saw on the mountain. Jesus in his glory

So transfixed by what they saw, They weren't really sure or aware of what they were doing.

So amazing was the experience that Peter wanted to hang on to the moment – let us make shelters for you – but then the voice of God came to them from the cloud. *“This is my Son, the beloved, with him I am well pleased. Listen to him”*

What an experience. What a moment.

But, of course, regardless of Peter's desire to hang on to the moment, it had to come to an end. They had to descend back onto the plain. Back to everyday life. And it's interesting to note what follows on from this mountain top experience.

In all of the gospel accounts, we read that for the disciples the first thing they encounter is a foaming shrieking demon. You can't get much more different than that from their experience of awe and wonder on the mountain top.

But that tells us a lot about these mountain top experiences. The disciples wanted to stay at the top of the mountain. We have seen Peter - let us build shelters for you. Let's stay here. This is good. We are in the presence of God. May it always be like this.

But the reality is that life goes on. There is foaming at the mouth and shrieking. And we need the mountain top experiences to get us through the mire and the mess of life.

And we can see this throughout life – in our day to day world as well as in our relationship with God.

A wedding day - and then the reality of married life - with all its ups and downs.

We cannot always be in the smart suit or the white dress.

A holiday (like our holidays in Scotland)- and then the return to the normality of routine. We can't always be walking the hills or lounging by the pool. We have to face up to the hard decisions and pressures of everyday life.

A romantic candlelit supper – and then back home where the children have woken up and the cat has been sick.

In our individual walks with God, our Christian lives, our faith journeys - there may well be times (and I certainly hope there are or have been for you) when we truly experience the glory of God. When we feel we have met with him in

an intense and real way. When our faces might literally or metaphorically shine.

In my own experience, Worshipping God in the big top at the Soul Survivor festival with thousands of young people. The Spirit of God moving and healing and touching people

Or being carried into Gods presence with the beautiful singing of a cathedral choir in evensong. The words and the harmonies

Sitting alone in a church- rooted to the spot - unable to move because god is working something in me. The peace and tranquillity

Or the hills and seas – and gazing at the wonder of Gods creation and wondering at his love for me

But these moments are not given for my boasting or for my glory

They are given to equip and encourage me

That when I have to face the hard challenges of life – or even the normal day to day challenges -

I have the means of coping.

I can pray to the God I have seen and encountered and experienced

And know that he will be there alongside me.

The sadness of the transfiguration story is that when the demon - the foaming shrieking evil - came to the disciples, they couldn't do anything.

Despite their mountain top experience

Despite having been so clearly in God's presence, despite hearing his voice and bathing in his glory

Despite their intimate knowledge of Jesus

They could do nothing

We might wonder why –

perhaps in their minds they were still on the mountain rather than having left and take the experience and memories and lessons with them

We read that they tried to heal the boy but they couldn't.

I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they couldn't.

in the words of the master, of Jesus himself - they lacked faith, or in Marks account - this kind can only come out through prayer.

They were relying on themselves not on God. They hadn't learned the lesson from the mountain top that the God they encountered there is the one who would be with them on the valley floor. Instead they felt that having been to the top they could do anything. In their own strength.

I guess the church, perhaps the world, is full of people who crave after the mountain top experiences they once had, as if they cant live without it.

The truth is surely that we have such experiences - we are blessed by God in such powerful ways - so that we can handle the pressures and downsides and disasters of life. The mountain top teaches us a lesson – but we have to move away from it to apply that teaching

And supremely this can be seen in Jesus.

Just what was the transfiguration all about?

It was all about his death. The crucifixion. His departure.

The experience of being bathed in the glory of God prepared him for the worst that the world could throw at him.

Moses and Elijah by their presence pointed the way.

The same way that they as lawgiver and prophet had had to tread in the OT stories.

'They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure' – the account in Lukes gospel tells us

And if this is the way for Jesus - that the mountain top experience was there to prepare him for the foaming and shrieking demons of the arrest and trial and crucifixion, then it will be so for us. Not for us the arrest and crucifixion, but certainly for us challenges and difficulties. Facing up to the demons we fear.

But God will give us the strength in him to cope with these fears, to cope with life – and we can draw on our experiences at the mountain tops to help us trust in him once we are back on the valley floors.

And finally a prayer of blessing which ties these thoughts together ..

Dazzling
A Blessing for Transfiguration
Sunday (Jan Richardson)

Believe me, I know
how tempting it is
to remain inside this blessing,
to linger where everything
is dazzling
and clear.

We could build walls
around this blessing,
put a roof over it.
We could bring in
a table, chairs,
have the most amazing meals.
We could make a home.
We could stay.

But this blessing
is built for leaving.
This blessing
is made for coming down
the mountain.

This blessing
wants to be in motion,
to travel with you
as you return
to level ground.

It will seem strange
how quiet this blessing becomes
when it returns to earth.
It is not shy.
It is not afraid.

It simply knows
how to bide its time,
to watch and wait,
to discern and pray

until the moment comes
when it will reveal
everything it knows,
when it will shine forth
with all that it has seen,
when it will dazzle
with the unforgettable light
you have carried
all this way.

—Jan Richardson
from *Circle of Grace: A Book of*
Blessings for the Seasons