

From Mountain Tops to Valley Depths

A sermon on Luke 9:28-36

By Canon Simon Everett

On Friday Linda and I walked to the top of Creech Barrow. It was a glorious winter's day and the views over the Purbeck Hills and Poole Harbour were magnificent. Many of you will know that, for me, hill walking is one of my favourite ways of relaxing, whether it is going up and down the hills of the Southwest Coast Path, walking over open moorland or some of the UK mountain ranges, I just love the challenge, the exertion and the reward of the views and sense of achievement at the end of it all.

I therefore find it most odd that up until a couple of hundred years ago mountains and hills were regarded as places to be avoided. The young wealthy aristocrats on their grand tour of Europe would keep curtains on their carriage windows firmly drawn when passing through the Alps and other mountain ranges so as not to see the views that passed them by. One writer explains, 'They found the mountains to be frightening and unfamiliar, undesirable and repellent – monstrous excrescences of warts, pimples and blisters on the face of the earth.' How extraordinary!

Thankfully there were no such reservations in Jesus' day or, for that matter, in Biblical times. Because in the Bible many defining moments take place on, or at the top of, mountains.

- God's covenant with Noah, after the flood, is on top of Mount Ararat.
- The provision of the lamb for Abraham and Isaac on a mount in Moriah.
- Moses receives the law on Mount Sinai and then often meets with God at the mountain peak, and finally he is taken to be with his friend God, in the mountains overlooking the Promised Land.
- And then there is Elijah who contends with the prophets of Baal on top of Mount Carmel and then, after fleeing for his life, meets with God on Mount Horeb.

Mountains also feature in the Psalms and prophetic writings.

Then when we go into the New Testament, again mountains and hills feature prominently, with the mount of temptation in the wilderness, followed by the Sermon on the Mount. Also, mountains are where Jesus frequently goes to pray and have time with his heavenly Father. And later in the Gospels Jesus is transfigured on a mountain top and later still he is crucified on what is thought to be a hill outside the city walls. And then ascends to his Father from the Mount of Olives.

This morning, I want to focus on the transfiguration, which we heard about in our second reading when Jesus meets with Moses and Elijah on a mountain in Judea.

Of all the events recorded in the Holy Bible, for me the most enigmatic is the Transfiguration of our Lord. It is a truly mystical moment, or to use a more technical term, it is a numinous event, an event that defies our understanding, an event that takes us outside ourselves into spiritual realms that are beyond our comprehension.

Apart from the resurrection of our Lord, this is without doubt one of the most glorious moments the world has ever known. While we are here on earth we occasionally catch glimpses of heaven, but conversely we also catch glimpses of hell. And we have certainly caught glimpses of this over the past couple of days with the invasion of Ukraine.

Also, it is a tragic irony that the feast of the Transfiguration falls on the 6th August, which just happens to be the day the first atom bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. A day when a catastrophic light engulfed and destroyed many thousands of lives and polluted much of the environment. What utter hell for the people of southern Japan.

It was the complete antithesis of the glories of the heavenly light illuminating the divine Son of God. According to eyewitness accounts, service men in the Pacific region, who witnessed the atomic tests, said that as they held their hands to their eyes to protect them they could see their bones through their skin, so intense was the light of the atomic explosion.

At the transfiguration the light was again so bright that the witnesses had to cover their eyes. But this light was the dazzling radiance of God's love, embracing and encouraging Jesus, and witnessing to the disciples the power of God's eternal love for them and the world.

But also, notice how it catches the disciples present unawares and Peter suggests that he, James and John should build some shelters for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. It is as if he wants to contain and keep hold of this stupendous moment. But of course, he cannot and before he knows it things are back to normal, but not before God the Father has spoken to them saying, "This is my Son whom I love. Listen to Him."

Moments like this never last, we wish that they could, but they don't. And part of the reason that they don't is because there is too much work to be done. Such moments are often given to us as a spur, to motivate us to do something more for God.

For Jesus this meant journeying to Jerusalem where he knew he was going to be betrayed, falsely accused and put to death. It should be recognised that glory comes at a cost. For Jesus it would mean the agonies of betrayal, torture and crucifixion.

For the disciples they would have to witness this and know the grief of seeing their friend and Rabbi killed. They would then have to try to get their heads around the fact that Jesus rose from the grave! And once they had done this, then they would be sent out into the world to tell others and face yet more suffering. But it was worth it because they had seen the glory of the Lord.

As I say, no mountain top experience can last forever and often after such an experience there can be a dramatic return to earth with a bump. And this was certainly the case for Jesus and the disciples. Immediately after the Transfiguration they go down the mountain to be confronted by an angry man. He had brought his son to Jesus to be healed, instead he found the remaining disciples, who did their best to heal the boy, but unfortunately they couldn't.

So from the glory of transfiguration Jesus and those with him descend to the indignation of failure, from the mountain top they descend to the floor of the valley: this can be the way of discipleship. It was for Jesus; it has been for his Church; and it is now for the people of Ukraine as they see their sovereign state invaded by the troops of a power crazed dictator.

The injustice of it is galling, the helplessness of the many innocent victims is heart-rending, the impotence of the NATO Alliance and UN is disagreeable and distressing in equal measure.

So what can we do?

We can, and we must, pray, probably like we have never prayed before:

- for peace, yes,
- for the Ukrainian troops on the ground, yes,
- for the weak and the vulnerable, yes,
- for world leaders, yes, even for President Putin and his apparatchiks.
- And, for the right outcome for all concerned.

But above all let us pray that the glorious light of Christ will shine in the dark places, especially where evil thinks it has the upper hand. After all, it was to overcome the evil of sin and death that Jesus went to the cross. In him is the promise of new life, on earth as in heaven. And may God's glory shine in us too. Amen.