

Mountaintops

I don't know about you but very often the place when I feel nearer to God is on top of a mountain. Mountain top experiences are great, and when I'm standing there, on top of a mountain enjoying the awesome majesty of God's creation, that's fantastic. And those who have been silly enough to follow me up mountains will agree with me that when you get there, you forget the pain of the climb, you just enjoy the moment.

And here the disciples are having a mountain top experience. Jesus, who has just told his disciples He is going to Jerusalem to die, goes up a up mountain and He is met by Moses and Elijah, two men who appeared too great to die.

Moses the greatest law giver and Elijah, greatest prophet. It's a story which appears in three synoptic gospels. It's a story shrouded in mystery, a story which has been the subject of many paintings, the most famous of which is probably the one by Raphael which hangs in the Vatican Museum.

Some would tell us that the fact that we are told he met Moses and Elijah is confirmation that we will recognise each other in the after life. I wonder how they recognised Moses and Elijah, it can't have been from their appearance, there were no photos to compare with, so we won't spend any time on that, the important thing is Bible tells us who they were, and they spoke with Jesus. They confirmed He was on the right path and then God came along and gave His confirmation.

The greatest law giver and the greatest prophet confirms Jesus' mission and the apostles who were there would not soon forget this. Years later when Peter is writing his second letter he remembers and he wrote 'We saw His majestic splendour with our own eyes when He received honour and glory from God the Father.'

This was landmark moment, a mountain top experience, a confirmation, we call it the transfiguration and in the New Living Translation it says that Jesus was transformed.

And, not surprisingly, the apostles don't know what to do and Peter who can't just stand still and be quiet, blurts out and in effect says 'hey Lord it's great to be here, if you want I'll make three shelters', in other words 'if you want we can settle here, we can stay here'.

Peter has not long before told Jesus off for thinking about going to Jerusalem to His death, here's another chance to stop that, so let's build some tents and stay here, and the Bible says that even as he spoke a bright cloud came over them, and a voice from the cloud.

No one was really paying any attention to Peter, there were greater forces at work, and greater destinies which needed to unfold. There is no doubt that the mount of transfiguration was a spiritual peak for Jesus, and for the apostles who accompanied Him.

What we are going to look at today is not what it was, but what followed, what they did with this experience. We have seen Peter wanted to stay there I am sure some of the others would have been content to do the same, but the moment was but a step in the way. For the apostles it dispels some of the dark cloud of fear which Jesus' foretelling of His death must have awakened and the whole episode speaks of, and proclaims the glory of God. God in majesty, God transcendent, God in power, God in control.

For Jesus, it was a time of confirmation, a time of enabling and recharging of batteries as it were before the final lap. And it is clear the apostles still did not understand, it might have given them some understanding that the cross was not going to be a humiliation, that God was in this, but Peter could not grasp the concept of standing still in the presence of God.

Peter always the man of action wants to do something, even if that something is not what is required, he does not recognise that there is a time for silence, a time for reverence, a time for absorbing the glory of God. Psalm 46:10 says, 'Be still, and know that I am God!' but sometimes we get so wrapped up in the moment that we can't absorb the moment, we get so wrapped up in what is going on around us that we can't absorb it and enjoy it, we feel we have to do something, when all that is required is that we worship in silent adoration.

On the other hand as I have already said Peter wanted to wait on the mountain, to prolong the moment. Because it is in our nature to want to hang on to mountain top experiences, it happens every time we go to a great conference, or we have a church weekend away. We are on a spiritual high and we don't want to come down into the valley of the reality of every day life, especially if that does not promise much comfort or joy, and that is understandable.

A H McNeile wrote 'The mountain of transfiguration is always more enjoyable than the daily ministry or the way of the cross'. The reality is that we need to recognise the mountain as a stepping stone. Susanna Wesley, the mother of John and Charles prayed, 'Help me, Lord, to remember that religion is not to be confined to the church or closet, nor exercised only in prayer and meditation, but that everywhere I am in your presence'.

We need to learn to move God from the mountain top into the valley and to go there. The moment of glory does not exist for its own sake, its purpose is to prepare us, to cover the common things with a radiance they never had before, and I believe there are lessons we need to learn from this that pertain to our lives as followers of Jesus, because if we profess to follow Him we are constrained to do as he would do, or did. If we call ourselves His disciples we should be guided by His example, and the example that he gives us here is one of obedience to the Father, is one of going where we do not want to go, is one of stepping out of the comfort zone, out of the warm fuzzy environment where we are protected and basking in the glory of God, into a cold, often dark and cruel world, full of pain and full of hardship, but still full of the glory of God because He is in us and goes with us.

Mountain top experiences are not meant to be lasting, the mountain top if we realise it, is not a good place to live in, there isn't much up there, it is arid, we can't affect much or do much if we are just enjoying ourselves.

Jesus sets before us the prime example that there comes a point where every mountain top experience must give way to the shadows of the valley to the place of tears and suffering. A time where transfiguration becomes transformation and transformation gives way to sacrifice. A time when we accept the enormity of what Jesus has done for us on the cross, and set our minds to follow where He has led, but so often we hang on to the moment of glory.

We come to the cross, we come to the point of recognising what Jesus has done for us, we see his pierced hands and feet, we accept him as our Lord and saviour, and then it's almost as though we would want to stay there. There is this warm fuzzy feeling of comfort and joy, we are the heirs of salvation, wow! We are called children of God, isn't that great! We have repented of our sins and have been made anew, fantastic! Now Lord let us build our tabernacle here, let us rest on our laurels, let us bask in your presence and your glory, and God says, 'get down off the mountain, this is only a stop on the way, this is only meant to enable and empower you, this is only meant to give you a vision of what is to come, there is work to do.

But Lord we would just rather stay here, we would just rather bask in your presence, we would rather worship you and glorify you, and God says, if you want to glorify me, be my disciples, if you want to glorify me, be my hands and my feet and my mouth, in a world that is going to hell'

There comes a point in our lives where we make that step from silent adoration, from basking in His glory, from transformation to action, and often it is a step that involves sacrifice. Sometimes it is

almost as though this surprises us, we have followed Jesus to the cross and are still surprised that sacrifice is expected of us. We have heard Jesus say, 'If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross, and follow me.'

But we want to stay on the mountain top Lord, we like it here, it's comfortable, Jesus says to us 'If you refuse to take up your cross and follow me, you are not worthy of being mine.' Those are harsh words Jesus, that's not fair Jesus. We've repented of our sin, we've called you Lord, we've accepted you as saviour, what more do you want? And Jesus says, 'I want your life to show that you mean it, I want no more and no less than what I gave for you, your life.'

If our transformation does not give way to sacrifice, we have missed the boat, we have lost the plot, and we are living in delusion. So often the things we do and the way we act are motivated by an incomplete understanding of what Jesus has done for us, and what response that should elicit from us.

It's almost as though we have accepted the fact that the wage of sin is death, we recognise that Jesus paid the price for our sin, that he died for us, that he took our sin upon himself, that he suffered for and died in our place, and we say 'thanks see you around' and carry on living our lives and ignoring that sin that put Him there.

I've been reading a book this week in the prayer room a book by Debbie Przybylski who is known by many of us in the church in Gibraltar, called 'Intercessors arise II'. And as I've read it I've come across a few quotations which really spoke to me. In one of them she is talking about repentance and she quotes from Henry Blackaby in his book *Experiencing God*, 'Repentance involves a radical change of heart and mind in which we agree with God's evaluation of our sin and then take specific action to align ourselves with His will. A desire to change is not repentance. Repentance is always an active response to God's Word. The evidence of repentance is not words of resolve, but a changed life. She also quotes this from Stormie Omartian's, *The power of a praying woman*, 'It's one thing to recognize when you have done something that has violated God's laws; it's another to be saddened by it to such a degree that you are determined to never do it again. That's repentance. Repentance means to change your mind. To turn and walk the other way. Repentance means being so deeply sorry for what you have done that you will do whatever it takes to keep it from happening again. Confession means we recognize we have done wrong and admit our sin. Repentance means we are sorry about our sin to the point of grief, and we have turned and walked away from it.'

I wonder how many times we don't meet this criteria, I know there have been many times in my life when I have missed the mark, many times when I have compromised with sin, times when I have been content with the idea of repentance, without following through with the action, times when I have been content to bask in God's glory, in the power of His transformation without being willing to move out of that and into sacrifice.

I also know that I need to change, those of you who were at the Thursday night celebration at the retreat centre heard me use another quotation from the same book where Debbie is talking about our prayer for revival, and she quotes from Elmer Towns and Douglas Potter in *The book the ten greatest revivals ever*. They wrote, 'When you pray for revival, you're asking God for life-shaking experiences that will cost you plenty. Revival is agonizing: It so terrorizes you over your sin that you repent deeply. Revival is consuming: It leaves you no time for hobbies, for chores around the house, for work, for sleep. Revival wrecks your appointment calendar, interrupts TV times, demands your full attention.'

Many are praying for revival, we pray for it in our prayer meetings, we pray for it in our private time, we pray for it in our joint services. I can tell you with the full authority of the word of God that it will not come while we are trying to stay on the mountain top, it will not come until we come to a full and real understanding of repentance, it will not come until we accept the enormity of our sin that put

Jesus on the cross, that put that crown of thorns on his head, that drove those nails into his hands and his feet and drove that spear in His side. It will not come until we move off our mountain top and follow Him to the cross, until we take that step from transformation to sacrifice, and if any of those things has a higher priority in our lives than following Him, then not only are we wasting our time waiting for revival, we are to a degree diminishing the value of His sacrifice on the cross for us.

I hope and pray that we never do that, I hope and pray that we are willing and able to take that step, I hope and pray that we can find in God the courage to move off the mountain down into the valley to make whatever sacrifices He calls us to in His service, that revival might come into our lives,, that revival might come into His church, that revival might creep out of His church into this community that we live in, that we pray for, that we care about. Let's accept that the mountain top is a time for preparation and God to show where to go from here.