

Introduction

I wonder if you are someone that likes to climb hills, or perhaps you used to like hill climbing even if it's not so easy for you these days.

There's something about walking up a hill that draws us in and moves us. The plodding on and on, climbing up and up until you reach the top and then a special moment with a stunning view as a reward at the top. I feel a real connection with God when I'm at the top of a hill

However....

Most of my hill climbing memories are of trudging all day to reach the top of a hill to find that the fog and rain means you can't see much past the end of your nose.

Nothing like this amazing scene.

I know there are a number of walkers in the congregation especially in the Green Strollers group so here is a piece of advice I can share with you

The farmer allows walkers to cross the field for free, but the bull charges.

Well this morning our passage takes us to the mountain top and one of the most spectacular, glorious moments in the whole of the New Testament. It's as if heaven opens just a crack and we get a glimpse of the wonder of Jesus divine nature.

As I looked at this passage over the last week or so it becomes clear that it is deliberately linked to other mountain top events in scripture. It's amazing to see the threads of the promises of God working their way through the whole bible in all it's different books and different authors but the same story to tell.

We can think of Moses in his mountain top experience from the second reading.

Back in the Old Testament in the book of Exodus Moses was invited to approach God on Mount Sinai. The glory of the Lord settled on the mountain like a cloud though it looked like a consuming fire to the waiting people of Israel.

For six days Moses waited and after six days God called him to the top of the mountain. While on the mountain God gave Moses the ten commandments and many instructions about how to build the tabernacle which would be the special place where God could dwell safely with his people. Where his glory would be shielded from the people.

It was a mountain top experience, an encounter with God that focussed on the law and obedience.

Or we could think of Elijah in 1 Kings 19

¹¹The LORD said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by."

Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. ¹²After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. ¹³When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.

Elijah's mountain top experience is equally dramatic
a powerful wind then an earthquake shattered rocks and then once again a fire but God was not in the fire. He was in the gentle whisper, the still small voice of God
Elijah's the Prophet's encounter was about listening for God's voice.

It just helps us to see this moment from our Matthew reading doesn't stand alone. It's not just 9 verses that can be extracted from the bible and read independently. They stand in the context of all that had gone before and both Moses and Elijah's experience lend insight here.

Transfiguration

Well the Matthew passage begins with the words 'six days later'. This was six days after Peter's recognition of just who Jesus was when he said "'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.'" and then Jesus first shared the news that he would be killed and raised again

Six days of that news hanging heavy in the air for the disciples, like a cloud over everything else that was going on and then Jesus called them up the mountain.

Peter, James and John go with him. It's not clear why but these seem to have been an inner circle of Jesus closest disciples, the ones who would get a special reassurance about who Jesus is.

So they follow Jesus and v2 'he was transfigured before them'. That word transfigured comes from the same word as metamorphosis, to be changed, transformed --- but it's a change arising from the essential nature within.

One commentator suggests it's like Clark Kent letting you see a glimpse of his superman costume where you suddenly realise who he is.

Or like a butterfly, trapped inside the relatively ugly body of a caterpillar before this amazing, delicate, colourful thing of beauty just breaks through and flies off into the air.

It's always there but hidden, and so the glory of Jesus is for the first time glimpsed by the disciples,

'his face shone like the sun',

'his clothes became white as the light' it's hard to imagine.

This isn't just Fairy Washing powder white but it's like the sun is coming from Jesus himself. The full glory of God, the power of his divinity can be glimpsed.

As Peter writes in reflection 'we were **eye-witnesses** of his majesty' 2 Peter 1:16

From the song before the sermon we sang "Like the shining sun in its noon-day strength, we now see the glory of Your wondrous face:"

Jesus face is so bright that to look at him would be to look at the sun with the naked eye, so dazzling, so incredible, so powerful that it's dangerous.

And then appearing with Jesus are Moses and Elijah – Luke's account of this story tells us they are talking about Jesus departure. His death, what lay ahead for Him.

Here we see Moses representing 'the law' and Elijah representing 'the prophets'. It links back to the passage from the last couple of weeks in the sermon on the mount. Jesus said 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.' ^{Matthew 5:17}

What is being glimpsed here is a fulfilment of what has been promised from the beginning of the old Testament. The glory of God is on show but the conversation is about the gospel - Jesus death, sacrifice and resurrection

And so in the midst of this awesome, overwhelming, supernatural moment we have good old Peter the disciple. Just saying what pops into his head. I'm trying to picture it.

The transfigured Jesus in discussion with Moses and Elijah with Peter hopping around in the background, trying to tap Jesus on the shoulder to say

'Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters – once for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah'

It's hard really to know Peter's reasons. Perhaps he was scared of the moment, scared of the power and radiance of Jesus and to put Jesus in a shelter would make him feel safer. Like the tabernacle of old when God dwelt in the holy of holies because it wasn't safe for people to see the full glory of God.

Or perhaps he just wants to hold on to the moment, that glorious mountain top moment that he wants to capture and to keep it just the way it is.

Perhaps even in a way to institutionalize it, a way to contain God.

However before anyone gives Peter an answer what came next was to frighten him more

'a bright cloud enveloped them' and God the Father spoke from the cloud'

'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased' an exact repeat of the words spoken by the Father at Jesus baptism in Matthew 3:17 but with the addition of a command

'Listen to him'

'Listen to him'

As if to say 'Peter if you really want to understand who Jesus is and what he came to do then be quiet. Stop trying to work it out yourself, to jump ahead but just listen to what he reveals'

The disciples fall face down to the ground in terror. Sometimes we become too familiar with the bible but it helps to take a moment to really think about what the situation would have been like.

Imagine it in your minds eye,

Climbing the hill with Jesus

The transfigured Jesus, shining like the sun, clothes white as light

The bright cloud enveloping them all

and the voice of God speaking -

what does that look like.

what does that sound like

The disciples expect to die, Like the Old Testament prophet Isaiah cried when he had a vision of God

"Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty." Isaiah 6:5

There is something about the fierce glory of God, the absolute holiness of God that if we catch a fraction of it we realise we are not fit to stand before it. So they cower in fear and trembling.

But then Jesus comes,

he comes over and he touches them.

'Get up' he said 'don't be afraid'

When they look up they see no-one but Jesus.

The dramatic events are over and they go down the mountain.

Response

Well, there's lots in there! The more you look at it the more you can find to think about. Links to Moses back in Exodus, Elijah in Kings, Teaching of Jesus in the gospels, Reflections of Peter in his New Testament letters and a Revelation style vision of Jesus. You can see the single thread of the gospel running through the whole bible.

But with all of that what does it mean for us here and now?

I want to suggest three responses

Listen

Worship

Trust

Listen

'Listen to him' that is the command that God gives when he speaks. As Peter flounders with his ideas of what should be done next. Perhaps getting preoccupied with structures and plans. God answers him in the most dramatic way and the instruction is 'Listen to him'

And by listen, He means obey. To hear the words of Jesus but not to do them isn't really listening. As Jim has taken us through the Sermon on the Mount in the last couple of weeks. How to be a disciple, being people that go the extra mile, it's clear that to listen also requires action.

Anyone who has been around children knows that occasionally listening isn't their greatest strength.

like a toddler who won't listen with fingers in his ears.

'la, la, I'm not listening'

Maybe we come to church, or we read the bible and we don't really listen. It's a 'yes God' as we wander out the door and carry on with whatever we were doing regardless.

Or maybe we are more toddler like and almost stick out fingers in our ears so that we don't have to listen to what Jesus is saying to us.

But here is one response to the transfiguration.

Listen to him.

Really stop and listen and then put that into action. Whether it's something from today, something from last week or something that God is saying in your own time.

Listen to him,

listen to that nudge to do something

listen to that command to go the extra mile

listen to that call to be a disciple.

Listen to what God is saying to you today.

The Transfiguration leads us to Listen

Worship

Secondly I think this passage demands a response of worship to Jesus. When we see just how special he is and are reminded that he is God in human form the only thing left for us to do is worship.

We see all the glory of Jesus but in the bible we also see how Jesus was willing to give that up for us. We have this stunning picture of just who Jesus is before the story of the gospels start to move towards the cross.

He went to the cross and for that moment gave up all of this glory.
For me and for you.

There are many striking contrasts between the hill top experience of the transfiguration and the crucifixion.

Instead of Jesus in glory we see him in shame
instead of shining white clothes his robes are torn from him
instead of being flanked by Moses and Elijah he has a thief on either side
instead of a bright cloud there is darkness
Instead of Peter's declaration of how good this moment is there is a denial
Instead of the Father's words of affirmation there is a surprised centurion declaring 'Surely he was the son of God'

The transfiguration and the crucifixion, the glory and the cross

But we need to see them both side by side, to see the glory **in** the cross and to see the cross **in** the glory.

Jesus was the sacrifice that made it possible for us to approach such a holy and glorious God. That meant we could come into his presence and that he could live with us but this glimpse of his glory makes that all the more amazing.

The transfiguration leads us to Worship

Trust

Finally this passage encourages us to Trust.

To trust Jesus to be with us in all that we face.

I've talked about mountain top experiences, special moments of joy and connection to God but we also have those valley moments in our lives. Darker times...

Times when we are afraid
Times when we struggle
Times when life just gives us a bit more than we think we can handle

But when the cloud comes down and the disciples are terrified Jesus comes and touches them

and says 'Get up' 'don't be afraid'.

We can trust in God's promise to be with us in all things. In that moment of fear Jesus is there for us too. Trust him to be there with a gentle touch and a reassurance that you don't need to be afraid.

Jesus comes down off the mountain with the disciples. He walks with them and talks with them and from fearing for their lives they are reassured by his presence.

Be reassured by his presence with you.

In all that you face,

in all that makes you afraid.

Trust that Jesus is with you, with a hand on your shoulder saying 'do not be afraid'.

The transfiguration leads us to Trust.

Listen

Worship

Trust