

## Sunday 18 February 2007: The Sunday before Lent

### The view from the mountaintop

**Readings: 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2; Luke 9:28-36**

*Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah" - not knowing what he said.*

The background picture on my computer in the office is a view from a mountaintop. It's a photograph I took last summer while I was walking the coastal path along the Llyn Peninsula in North Wales. The climb to the top of the mountain came about two days into an eight day walk and we were blessed with a perfectly clear summer day. It is a truly fantastic vantage point, from which it was possible to see almost the entirety of the journey we were making. Look back and you could see where we started and the distance we'd covered. Look forward and the coastline stretched ahead to its peak with Bardsey Island beyond, and then jagged back in towards Cardigan Bay. If we needed any inspiration or encouragement to continue the journey, that view from the mountain supplied it perfectly. So perfectly in fact, that I almost felt tempted to stay there and take in the view rather than to make the journey.

*Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah" - not knowing what he said.*

Because what the view didn't convey was all the rather more chequered details of the journey past and the journey that lay ahead. Looking back from the mountain top it wasn't possible to see the field that we got into and couldn't find a way out of because the stile that was supposed to be there had been broken down and overgrown. Looking forward it wasn't possible to see the blisters or the evening when the rain swept in as we scrambled through the seemingly endless series of descent and ascents of rocky coves that lay between us and our stopover, at the end of the longest day of the walk.

*Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray.*

The story of the Transfiguration is one of my favourite passages in the entire Gospels. In it I find echoes of Christ's incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection that resonate with my own experience, and on a good day at least, enable me to make some sense of my own story. And in it and in the stories that bookend it in the Gospel, I find extraordinary parallels between my own responses and experiences and those of the disciples as they struggle to comprehend the revelation of the Kingdom in their midst alongside their all too obvious failures and inadequacies. In the view it gives from the mountaintop, it manages to hold together a vision of glory with the utter messiness, confusing unpredictability and sheer slog of daily living.

For Jesus, it feels that, just like my mountaintop view, this story says something about the entirety of the journey that he makes. The great figures of Moses and Elijah, say something of the origins of his journey – where he comes from. Moses, the lawgiver, speaks of the covenant relationship between God and his people. Elijah, represents the prophets who called the people in faithfulness and obedience to that covenant. And when the voice speaks from heaven, the voice that says of Jesus 'This is my Son, my Chosen', it seems that the destination of the journey is also clear as Jesus' vocation and identity are confirmed. From that vantage point on that glorious day, it all seems clear – we could say that on the

mountaintop Jesus seems to have ‘made it’. How tempting it must have been not just for the disciples but for Jesus himself to stay there and take in the view rather than make the journey.

*Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah" - not knowing what he said.*

Because what the view from the mountaintop didn't make clear to the disciples was the painful reality of the journey that lay ahead. What the disciples couldn't see was the covenant represented by Moses would be brought to fulfilment in the new covenant sealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus. What the disciples couldn't see was that the faithfulness demanded by Elijah and the prophets would ultimately lead to what Luke describes as "his departure which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem". What the disciples couldn't see was that next voice to affirm Jesus as a "Son of God", would be that of a Roman soldier at the place of crucifixion. And if they had, would they ever have come down from the mountaintop? For read ahead in this chapter of Luke's Gospel and you'll find that when they did the first they confronted was failure – their own failure to heal a sick child – and the first words we hear from Jesus are his exasperation at this "faithless and perverse generation".

The Transfiguration is traditionally the reading for this Sunday before Lent. It stands in the Gospel as a turning point – a moment when we are told "Jesus set his face steadfastly towards Jerusalem". With its echoes of resurrection glory, it's the perfect image for this time when we begin to look ahead knowing that Easter day is there on the horizon. But like the disciples before us we have to come down from the mountain and find our way to resurrection through the temptations and failures of daily living. Like Jesus, who walks before us, we find there is no way to the glory of Easter day without the costliness of the passion and pains of betrayals and denials – both from others and, in our case, self-inflicted.

Those glorious mountaintop experiences when we catch a glimpse of the kingdom are hugely important. They give us a sense of rootedness in our past journeying and provide a vision of our destination to inspire and encourage us in our journey ahead. Perhaps it's growing up in Wales, but I find mountaintops one of the easiest places to pray and I try to persuade myself that if London wasn't quite so flat, I'd be a much more devout person than I am. But I know that I'm deluding myself, and that the real importance of those mountaintop experiences is the way they sharpen our perception to see the glory of God in the sheer mess of everyday life. Because the real challenge having glimpsed the glory, is to come down from the mountain and to see the transfiguration happening in the ordinary things of life.

I'm deeply, deeply thankful for mountaintop experiences, for those all too-fleeting moments when with something akin to certainty, I can touch and feel and sense the glory of God and echo Peter's words "Master, it is good to be here". But the real challenge for me and for any of us is to find the presence of Christ and echo those words not just in dramatic encounters but in the daily slog of endless meetings and in the much less attractive mountains of paperwork that clutter my days. The real challenge for me is to keep the destination in sight when by my own obstinacy and intransigence I find myself stranded in fields I can't get out of or by the choices I make find myself slipping on rocks of my own creation. And in facing those challenges, I look at that picture on my computer, and look beyond it to the Christ who comes down from the mountain to turn steadfastly towards Jerusalem and I make this prayer:

*Jesus! Steadfast, Uncertain, Glorious Lord,  
I give you thanks that you walk with me  
as I descend from the vision of your Glory  
to the places where you call me to perceive that Glory:*

*in the memorable and the mundane;  
in the improbable and the impenetrable;  
through the openings and the obstacles;  
through responsibilities and resonances.  
Jesus, in my daily journeying, may I perceive your Glory.*