

Transfiguration

In considering our readings for my sermon, my imagination was drawn to the Sound of Music and the song – Climb every mountain!

[Climb every mountain
Search high and low
Follow every highway
Every path you know

And

A dream that will need
All the love you can give
Every day of your life
For as long as you live]

Now I have used a bit of artistic licence in my editing of the lyrics but mountains figure heavily in both our OT and Gospel readings this morning.

Mount Tabor is a large, round hill in central Galilee. When you go there as a pilgrim, and I'm relying on Tom Wright to have this accurate, you have to get out of your pilgrimage bus and take a taxi to the top. It is said that God is especially pleased with Mount Tabor taxi-drivers because more praying goes on in the few minutes of hurtling up or down the narrow mountain road in those taxis than in the rest of the day or possibly week.

Mount Tabor is the traditional site of the transfiguration, the extraordinary incident which Matthew, Mark and Luke all relate about Jesus. The reality is that we're not sure whether it was Mount Tabor or Mount Hermon that Jesus took Peter James and John up. Whether Mount Tabor is preferred because Mount Hermon is more remote and inaccessible to tours of pilgrims whichever it is, the view over Galilee from both is stunning.

But of course, Jesus and his three friends were not up the mountain looking at the view or to sing "high on a hill was a lonely goatherd" but because they had something far more extraordinary to concentrate on. So extraordinary in fact that many people have found it hard to believe. But the story is so strange – not least Peter's odd blurted out suggestion about building shelters for each of them, so that many scholars agree there must have been a real historical event of this kind.

And in fact, there have been several other recorded instances, both ancient and modern, of similar things happening, when people have been very close to God in joyful prayer. Whether it is the high vantage point or not.

People often suggest that Jesus was shining brightly because he was divine and that this was a vision of his divinity which would otherwise have remained secret.

But in Luke's account both Moses and Elijah are shining too, so it can't mean that because we know that Moses and Elijah were not divine.

Anyway, earlier in the Gospel Jesus had said that all God's people would shine like stars in God's kingdom (quoting Daniel 12.3 [see Matthew 13.43]).

In fact for the NT writer in general, humanity provides the model for the glory which one day all his people will share. If you want to see Jesus' divinity, the early Christians would tell us that we must look, surprisingly at Jesus' suffering and shameful death. Puzzling. Well, it's a puzzle the early Christians insisted we should live with.

In fact, the scene at the Transfiguration offers a strange parallel and contrast to the crucifixion which is perhaps why this Gospel reading has traditionally been the reading for the final Sunday before Lent as though to prime and prepare us for the period ahead.

While meditating on the one, you should have the other in the back of your mind. Here on the mountain is Jesus revealed in glory; there on the hill outside Jerusalem is Jesus revealed in shame. Here his clothes are shining white; there they have been stripped off and soldiers have gambled for them. Here he is flanked by Elijah and Moses, two of Israel's greatest heroes, representing the law and the prophets; there he is flanked by two thieves, representing the level to which Israel has sunk in rebellion against God. Here a bright cloud overshadows the scene; there darkness comes upon the land. Here Peter blurts out how wonderful it all is; there, he is hiding in shame after denying he even knows Jesus. Here a voice from God himself declares that this is his wonderful son; there, a pagan soldier declares, in surprise, that this really was God's son.

The mountain-top explains the hill-top and vice versa. Perhaps we only really understand either of them when we see it side by side with the other. So that means we need to learn to see the glory in the cross; learn to see the cross in the glory; and if we can do that then we will have begun to bring together the laughter and the tears of the God who hides in the cloud, the God who is to be known in the strange person of Jesus himself. This story is of course about being surprised by the power, love and beauty of God. And we need to listen to the voice of Jesus and the same power, love and beauty within it.

Matthew as elsewhere in his Gospel, highlights the parallel between Jesus and Moses. Moses led the children of Israel out of Egypt and before completing his task, went up Mount Sinai to receive the law. He went back up the mountain after the Israelites had drastically broken the law to pray for them and beg for God's mercy. Elijah too met God in a special way on Mount Sinai; but Matthew's interest, throughout the gospel, is in the way in which Jesus is like Moses, except more so.

Towards the end of Moses' life God promised to send the people a prophet just like him (Deuteronomy 18) and gave the command: you must listen to him. Now, as Moses once again meets God on the mountain, the voice from the cloud draws attention to Jesus, confirming what Peter had said previously in Chapter 16: "you're the Messiah", he said. "you're the Son of the living God!". Jesus is not simply a prophet: he is God's own son, the Messiah and God is telling us that He is delighted with what he is doing. The word to the disciples then is equally important to us today. If we want to find the Way, the Way to God, the way to the promised land – we must listen to him.