

Sunday 14th February – The Transfiguration of Jesus

Mark 9:2-9

A week later, Jesus took Peter, James and John away by themselves, and went up a high mountain. There he was transformed before their eyes. His clothes shone with a whiteness that no laundry on earth could match. Elijah appeared to them, and Moses too, and they were talking with Jesus.

“Teacher,” said Peter as he saw this, “It’s great to be here! I tell you what – we’ll make three shelters, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah!” (Peter didn’t really know what to say; they were terrified.)

Then a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud: “This is my son, the one I love. Listen to him!”

Then, quite suddenly, they looked round and saw nobody there any more, only Jesus with them.

As they came down the mountain, Jesus instructed them not to talk to anyone about what they had seen, “until”, he said, “the son of man has been raised from the dead”.

For this sermon I thought I’d try something a bit different. I recorded it whilst out walking with my wife, Julia. These words are a transcript of the sermon. I’d like you to imagine a mountain scene, perhaps walking along a path that climbs the mountain slopes. If you are imagining yourself becoming breathless and panting, then that’s how I’m beginning to sound on the recording.

Good morning! I don’t expect many of you, if any, have been walking up mountains recently. Or, if you have, that might not have been very legal!

Anyway, in thinking about today’s story of Jesus and his transfiguration on the mountain, it made me think of some of my own mountain experiences, not in the transfiguration sense, but climbing mountains.

One of the first ones I remember was on holiday in Snowdonia, when I was twelve or so. We’d been to Snowdonia, the mountain itself, but we hadn’t left time to go up. And I think, actually, mum wasn’t really wanting to walk up the mountain. So we clubbed together and we went up on the steam train. It was one of the highlights of that holiday. In fact, it’s the only memory I have of that holiday. Of course, it’s not quite the same as the mountain that Jesus went up because at the top of Snowdonia there’s a café, which is quite convenient. The other thing I remember was that when we got to the top my school woodwork teacher, David Oyns, was there. Another aside, Mr Oyns had a light blue Ford Anglia just like in the Harry Potter movies, but I don’t think his could fly. Anyway, the views from the top were quite spectacular, as you can imagine.

Another mountain experience on holiday with mum and dad, after Julia and I were married, having a holiday in the Lake District. We’d done quite a lot of walking, so much that mum’s little Dachshund’s, we’d made their paws sore; and so on this day mum wasn’t coming with us. Julia and I thought instead we’d walk up Helvellyn.

Mum and dad dropped us off on the road by Thirlmere Lake. And we went up the path. It was one of those climbs where, you go up and there’s a ridge. You don’t know it’s a ridge,

you think it's the top of the mountain, until you get there, and then you realise that the top of the mountain is still a lot further to go. And then there's turns and twists on the paths.

But eventually we did get to the top.

So did many, many others. And if you've been to Helvellyn you'll know that the way back down, towards Patterdale, is along Striding Edge. And that was memorable because, well, it would have been fine if we'd all been going in the same direction. But there were as many people coming from Patterdale as going to Patterdale. Passing each other on that ridge wasn't the most, the safest of experiences. The other memory there was being on that ridge and the RAF jets coming through the valley and we were actually higher than the jets.

Perhaps you have mountain experiences as well that you remember.

Well, I'm wondering whether these last twelve months we've felt that we've been on a kind of mountain. We've experienced something that has been quite tiring, something we've not experienced before, it's been taking a lot of effort. As soon as we get to one part of the climb we think we're nearly there. But then there's a change of direction, and then the mountain goes on and we still don't know where the top is.

I wonder though, why did Jesus go up the mountain? Why did he take James and John and Peter this time? Was it just for company? We're told in Mark it was high mountain. It wasn't just a mountain, this one was a high mountain. Maybe he took them for safety. But nevertheless, it was a place that Jesus wanted his disciples to be with him.

Let's reflect on that for a moment.

Welcome back!

Yeah, I'm still walking up a hill. You can hear in my talking and in my breathing that it's taking a bit of effort.

I wonder now whether you've had chance to think back over some of your own mountain experiences.

So why on a mountain? Couldn't the transfiguration have happened down in the villages, at ground level? Why on a mountain?

Well, I've been thinking about this. Mountains are mentioned in the Bible, I read somewhere, about 500 times. (*Just wait for this car to pass.*) In Genesis we read that Abraham took Isaac up a mountain. And Moses went up mountains. In fact, Moses was told to go up a mountain on his own because the mountain was such a sacred place, so sacred, so holy that if any of the Israelites were even to touch the mountain they would die. And it was on a mountain that God gave Moses the ten commandments. And elsewhere in the Old Testament there are lots of reference to mountains.

And Jesus in the New Testament - the Sermon on the Mount is just one example. The mount of crucifixion, the Mount of Olives. Jesus often got up early and went out on his own to the mountain. So I wonder whether there was a sort of continuation of that traditional

theme of mountains being sacred holy places where God could speak to his people. In this case to speak to James, John and to Peter.

Well, I also think that Jesus wanted to take James, John and Peter away from the village, away from the people and away from distractions. We know often that when Jesus did come back, either having crossed the lake, or coming back down the mountain, the crowds came to him, rushed to him, and clamoured for his attention. So, I wonder whether Jesus was wanting to take them away from distractions.

Maybe there's a lesson in that for us too. Often, we know that at home were distracted by things that we need to do. But we're also distracted by technology. And many other things that clamour for our attention too. Think about that for a moment; what distracts you?

I've come away from the highway. It's a bit quieter, so hopefully you can hear me a bit better.

I said we're often distracted by the things that we need to do. Actually, I think we're distracted quite often by those things that we don't need to do.

So what is it then when God wants to grab our attention? I think he certainly grabbed the attention of James, John and Peter on that mountain, that high mountain. They heard God say, "This is my son, the one I love. Listen to him." Listen to him.

Had that experience happened down in the villages, down in the valley, I wonder whether the disciples would have been paying attention. There would be distractions around them.

God says to us, "Listen to him. Listen to Jesus, my son."

What do we do in our lives to put ourselves where we're not distracted, where we can spend time quietly listening to what Jesus might be saying to us?

I find it's easier for me first thing in the morning, and before Julia gets up. To go downstairs make a drink, and to sit on my own quietly in the kitchen. I can read my Bible and I can pray. Some may prefer at the end of the day, at bedtime. For me, this isn't a good idea – as soon as my head is on that pillow, I'm asleep!

I think the important thing is that we find what suits us. There's no 'one size fits all'. So, what will you do this week to put yourself in a place where you can listen to God, where you can listen to Jesus? Think about a quiet place that you can turn to. Think about what you might want to read. Whether you want to just read the Bible, following some sort of plan, or following some daily Bible notes that give you a scripture reading and a thought for the day. Again, there's no one size fits all.

The important thing, though, is that all of us, we listen to him. Amen.

James Parsons, Reader