

## **February 23<sup>rd</sup> 2020 – St Andrew's [Transfiguration Sunday]**

### **Peaks & Valleys**

Do you remember where you were and what you were doing on July 20<sup>th</sup> 1969?  
Maybe this'll help: it was the day of the Apollo 11 moon landing.  
Did you tune in to watch it? Or read about later in the news?  
What about Game 8 of the 1972 Summit Series,  
when Paul Henderson scored that last goal?  
My dad says that the teachers just gave up  
and wheeled TVs into the classrooms  
so everyone could watch.

Or the more recent gold-medal game at the 2010 Olympics?  
I was around for that one...  
...I remember sitting on the edge of the couch for the whole game  
and then hearing people cheering  
from the balconies of neighbouring apartments.

On a more serious note...what about November 22 1963,  
when JFK was assassinated?  
Or November 9 1989, when the Berlin Wall came down?  
Or September 11 2001, when we North Americans  
learned again what fear meant?  
These are big, watershed moments  
in our collective cultural history.

Very often, we do remember where we were or what we'd been doing,  
and we remember how we felt,  
then and in the aftermath,  
whether excited, joyful, proud of our country,  
devastated, or afraid.

We've got more personal moments, too,  
that we organise our memories around.  
Marriages, kids being born, big moves,  
new jobs or lost jobs, retirement, illness, school...  
...they are landmarks in our past,  
points of reference that we talk about  
in terms of life before and life after;  
thresholds in our lives that,  
once crossed,  
cannot be stepped back over  
into how things were before.

Peter, James and John are having a threshold moment in their lives.  
It started out so simply  
– a walk up a mountain, just the three of them and Jesus –  
but it very quickly became strange, confusing and frightening.  
Their teacher and friend begins to glow from within,  
face shining like the sun,  
ordinary clothes suddenly white as the light.  
Two of the greatest prophets of the past  
– Moses and Elijah –  
appear with Jesus,  
men who had themselves seen the face of God in the flesh:  
Moses on Mount Sinai when he received the Law,  
the ten commandments;  
and Elijah the prophet  
when he was taken up into heaven  
by a flaming chariot.

Whatever is happening to their friend Jesus  
is deeply rooted in the oldest traditions of their people;  
it's about the glory and power of God, seeing God face-to-face.  
Peter offers to build shelters, one for each man;  
perhaps out of respect, or a desire to create  
something of permanence...  
...we don't really know for certain.

But before he can do more than make the offer, things amp up.  
A bright cloud,  
like the one that used to accompany the ark of the covenant,  
covers them and God speaks:  
this is my Son, the beloved...listen to him!

I cannot even begin to imagine what that voice might have sounded like.  
But the disciples were so filled with awe and terror,  
that they collapsed face-down on the ground.  
The glorious presence and commanding voice  
of the God of all creation overwhelms them.

But from within the sound and fury,  
the light and power,  
the terror and mystery of this moment,  
Jesus reaches out a hand, touches them,  
and reassures them:  
don't be afraid.

Don't be afraid;  
and they open their eyes,  
and look up,  
and see that it is only Jesus, after all.

Does anything banish our fears more perfectly  
than a simple, human touch,  
from a well-loved and trusted hand?

God, who made the heavens and the earth and all that is in them;  
God, whose greatness is so vast  
that not even the heavens above the heavens can contain it;  
God, who we belong to,  
is so magnificent that He is willing to come among us  
to reach out, touch us, and still our fears.

Remember the angel's promise at the very beginning of Jesus' story?  
"They shall name him Emmanuel,' which means 'God is with us.'"  
Jesus' hand on the shoulder of the disciples,  
is nothing less than God's own touch.  
Anything more would be too much for them to bear.

This is the way that God comes into the world:  
not simply the brilliant cloud of mystery,  
not only a voice thundering from heaven,  
but also a human hand laid upon a shoulder and the words,  
"Do not be afraid."  
God comes to us quietly, gently,  
so we can draw near and not be afraid.

During our Bible Study a few weeks ago,  
we talked about Paul's encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus;  
it was a similar sort of thing:  
voice from above, light and sound and an immediate effect.  
We wondered how that encounter,  
in all its drama and mystery and power,  
must have driven Paul's incredible  
life-long passion for the Good News  
of Christ crucified and resurrected,  
and for establishing congregations  
to live out that new

resurrection life around the Mediterranean.

We wondered, too, about our own encounters with Jesus,  
and how they drive and shape us.

Paul's experience

– and the experience of the disciples with Christ  
at his transfiguration –  
were extraordinary,  
but our own encounters  
are no less significant to us.

We often find God revealed to us  
in Jesus' gentle and loving hand on our shoulder,  
telling us not to be afraid:  
in hospital rooms, in the early hours of the morning,  
as we wrestle with doubt, with loneliness,  
with sin, with suffering and brokenness.

We are led to the top of the mountain  
and find ourselves face-to-face,  
however briefly,  
with that powerful, glorious, Creator of all reality,  
sound and fury, light and power,  
terror and mystery...  
...and find that it is also only Jesus,  
that gentle and loving hand  
on our shoulder, after all.

But of course, we can't stay on that mountain peak forever,  
and like the disciples, we too must descend back to the valley.  
And valleys can be tricky, thorny places to travel through,  
full of twisting paths and no high ground to get our bearings.

Peter's second letter, from which we read an excerpt this morning,  
is written from the valley.

Whether Peter himself wrote it  
or if his followers cobbled it together after his death,  
it is presented as Peter's last testimony  
to what he had seen and experienced.

And what a testimony  
– from the shores of Galilee to the mountain-peak,  
to denying Jesus, witnessing the resurrected Christ,  
the command to feed Christ's sheep,

Pentecost, establishing the early church –  
Peter had lived an incredible life  
of faithful service to God.

And now people are saying it's all made up,  
a human invention:  
Christ is not coming back,  
certainly not as cosmic judge and saviour,  
and there is no God,  
so all that prophecy is meaningless, anyway.

That had to have hurt and frustrated Peter;  
after so many years, to still be dealing  
with the same mess of conflicting voices  
and false teachings.  
But it definitely made him and his followers angry...  
...read 2 Peter 2 after lunch today,  
and enjoy the colourful language  
used to describe the fate of those  
who deny that Jesus  
is coming back  
and that God  
is real.

But what's interesting here, and what makes it uniquely relevant today,  
is that this opposition isn't violent or political;  
it's not Romans throwing Christians to the lions.  
This is not a valley of physical suffering and pain;  
this is a valley of intellectual attrition;  
a wearing-down of faith  
by introducing doubt  
and attempting to rationalise  
the glory and power  
and mystery  
of God in Christ.

The reality of God,  
what Christ is and will be,  
doesn't have to make sense to be true,  
and trusting that,  
believing it's all real and having faith,  
is a struggle still going on today,  
between us and secular,  
non-religious society...

...but also in our own hearts  
and minds.

In one of his books in the *Chronicles of Narnia* series,  
C. S. Lewis writes a final word from Aslan,  
the great lion that represents Jesus:

“Here on the mountain I have spoken to you clearly.  
I will not often do so down in Narnia.  
Here on the mountain, the air is clear and your mind is clear;  
as you drop down into Narnia, the air will thicken.  
Take great care that it does not confuse your mind.  
And the signs which you have learned here  
will not look at all  
as you expect them to look,  
when you meet them there.  
That is why it is so important to know them by heart  
and pay no attention to appearance.  
Remember the signs and believe the signs.  
Nothing else matters.”

Remember and believe...  
...our memory of those moments  
where the curtain of reality is pulled back  
and we encounter God on the mountain's peak,  
whether in blinding light  
or that warm and gentle presence,  
those moments shape our faith,  
give it depth and certainty  
and substance.

They are threshold moments;  
after encountering God,  
we cannot go back to who we were before...  
...they are landmarks, points of reference,  
places we look back on and say  
“life before...and life after.”  
Those moments are how God prepares us  
and empowers us  
to endure life in our broken world;  
to walk faithfully  
in the valley below.

It's a lot to take in...but maybe it should be.  
The God who created, who is powerful and glorious,  
a bright cloud and a thunderous voice from above...  
...is the same God in Christ who walked and talked,  
ate and wept;  
lived and suffered and died and rose again;  
who grasped the shoulders  
of his frightened disciples and friends  
and said,  
don't be afraid.

The only thing that surpasses,  
that is greater than  
the glory and majesty and power of God  
is His willingness to shed all of that,  
so we might be able to recognise  
His love and gentleness;  
all of God, folded and concentrated down,  
into a hand reaching out to us.

The season of Lent is starting soon, this Wednesday.  
Where Advent is a celebratory time of great anticipation,  
Lent is more for personal, spiritual preparation in advance of Easter,  
inviting us to make our minds and hearts ready.  
There are many different ways to mark Lent  
across Christian tradition,  
but the common theme is that  
it's a time to encounter God  
personally.  
One way to do that is through more intensive devotional reading of Scripture,  
so I do hope you'll grab a devotional booklet  
or sign-up for the email version.

Because it's easy to forget,  
to lose our way as we drop down into the valley and the air thickens,  
and we forget to remember.  
Encountering God,  
having those mountain-top experiences  
that'll carry us through the valley...  
...in Christ,  
God is reaching out to us, always.  
Grasp His hand.  
Amen.