

## Quinquagesima 2020 Year A

Have you ever had a high place moment? I have one such moment, but it wasn't so much a wondrous experience as a terrifying one. As a teenager, I was very involved at Truro Cathedral both as a chorister and part-time vergers during the summer holidays – and probably a great trial to the Dean and Chapter! The central spire was having work carried out to its apex and a ladder fixed to the spire itself with a scaffold crown around the cross and weathercock. In those days I quite fancied my head for heights and asked the steeplejacks if I could climb to the top. Health and Safety didn't exist other than in a rudimentary form, and Mr Dawson Jr readily agreed. He only stipulated that it would be best for me to climb up the inside of the ladder with my back against the spire itself. No ropes, no safety harness, just a ladder clamped to the stonework. The tower and spire stand over 260 feet tall, so up I started to climb. About halfway up I reached a point where several rungs of the ladder were missing and that became the point at which real fear reared its head, and I scuttled down to terra firma – or at least tower firma!

Many of the profoundest moments of revealing Faith within the Bible occur on mountains or high places; the Mounts Ararat, Sinai, Horeb, Tabor and Hermon. Jerusalem is built on Mount Zion. All represent different experiences of encounter with God, and in some fear or even terror is experienced.

- We have moments of revelation: the giving of the Ten Commandments to Moses and the Transfiguration of the Lord we have heard today. The Prophet Elijah runs away from Ahab and Jezebel following his supposed triumph over the prophets of Baal and on Mount Horeb, when he is depressed beyond measure, finds God in 'the still small voice.'
- There are moments of teaching: Moses receives the statutes of the Law in Exodus (21-23) and Jesus preaches the Sermon on the Mount.
- However, the most powerful are profound moments of passion – the near sacrifice of Isaac and the Crucifixion of the Lord.

All these 'mountaintop' encounters represent an understanding of a closeness to the divine presence. They are Godly encounters of journeying within Faith.

In exploring the Transfiguration of the Lord, it is perhaps good to place it within the Gospel sequence. In fact, in Matthew, Mark and Luke's Gospels, the same order is followed. At Caesarea Philippi the Apostles acknowledge the Messiahship of Jesus after he asks them who people say he is. Matthew and Mark record the argument between Peter and Jesus when the Lord explains what his Messiahship represents – he is now on a journey where the cross of self-giving love will turn the human understanding of Godly power on its head. From the beautiful green countryside of Caesarea Philippi they travel through the dry desert region towards Jerusalem where Jesus will reveal the purest of love for each of us.

Before this, Peter, James and John experience their mountaintop moment. There is no longer the need for the presence of God to be seen in the burning bush, or of humanity hiding in the cleft of a rock as God passes by. No longer is the mountain wreathed in

smoke, fire and the sound of thunder, with the accompanying threat of divine punishment for coming too close. Neither is the presence of God made known an ambiguous call.

It is in the face of Jesus that Peter, James and John experience the true veil of glory drawn back. This is the real McCoy, not the emptiness of the Temple's Holy of Holies revealed when the curtain tears in two at the moment Jesus dies. The glory of God is revealed in Jesus. Moses and Elijah – the Law and the Prophets - converse with the Word made Flesh and this profound moment of transcendent glory underlines the words of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount: *Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. (Matthew 5: 17)* No wonder Matthew tells us that the disciples were terrified. Who wouldn't have been? It took the touch of Jesus and the words, 'Get up and do not be afraid,' that they are brought back to earth by the one who is true God and true man. St Jerome wrote that Jesus '*mercifully came up and touched them so that through his touch he might put to flight their fear and strengthen their limbs. Then those whom he had healed with his hand, he heals with his command, 'Have no fear.'*

Let's not lose sight of the overall structure of this account. The four of them (Jesus, Peter, James and John) descend from the mountain and are plunged into everyday life. They see before them human suffering, bewilderment, anxiety and disbelief as they encounter the father whose son is mentally ill and whom the other disciples have been unable to help. I am always struck by the father's cry, '*Lord I believe, help my unbelief!*' (Mark 9: 24) Thus the mountaintop glory of God is brought to earth in the compassion of Jesus as the boy is indeed healed.

The disciples are on a journey of discovery. The weekday Gospels this week have been leading up to Mark's account of the Transfiguration and he includes the record of a healing that Matthew and Luke don't use. Perhaps they found it embarrassing. It comes immediately before the Caesarea Philippi moment when a blind man is brought before Jesus and the man's friends beg Jesus to give him sight. Jesus uses spit on the man's eyes and then asks if he can see. '*I can see people, but they look like trees walking.*' (Mark 8: 24) Jesus lays his hands on the man's eyes again, and then his sight is restored – he can see everything clearly.

I think that Mark is drawing our attention to the fact that the disciples are as much on a journey of faith as those who surrounded them. Jesus isn't working on half-power or low wattage in this healing moment. It is the blind man's own response to faith in Jesus which is the important element in the account. Thus we see, even following their experience of the Transfiguration, that Peter, James and John are still only half-seeing the fulness of life they will ultimately find in Jesus. It takes death and resurrection to clear their minds to understand their call to share in the richness of the very life of God through following Jesus Christ. This is our own call.

The real glory of Jesus is revealed on the hill outside a city wall – Golgotha - where Jesus is lifted up from the earth and draws **all** people to himself. (John 12: 32) The radiance of God's love dwells within each one of us and desires our journeying not only to draw aside the veil and grow our own faith but to allow others to be drawn to the light of the mountaintop now made known within our present realities.



Apse mosaic of the Transfiguration from Saint Catherine's Monastery, Sinai, 565–566AD

### Exodus 24: 12-end

<sup>12</sup>The Lord said to Moses, 'Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.' <sup>13</sup>So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. <sup>14</sup>To the elders he had said, 'Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them.'

<sup>15</sup>Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. <sup>16</sup>The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. <sup>17</sup>Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. <sup>18</sup>Moses entered the cloud and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

### 2 Peter 1: 16-end

<sup>16</sup>For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. <sup>17</sup>For he received honour and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, 'This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.' <sup>18</sup>We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.

<sup>19</sup>So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. <sup>20</sup>First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, <sup>21</sup>because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

### Matthew 17: 1-9

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. <sup>2</sup>And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. <sup>3</sup>Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. <sup>4</sup>Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I<sup>[a]</sup> will make three dwellings<sup>[b]</sup> here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' <sup>5</sup>While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved;<sup>[c]</sup> with him I am well pleased; listen to

him!' <sup>6</sup>When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. <sup>7</sup>But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Get up and do not be afraid.' <sup>8</sup>And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

<sup>9</sup>As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, 'Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.'