

A Reflection from Revd Ali for the Sunday next before Lent

Have you ever climbed a mountain? I haven't, but I have climbed some pretty big hills. I used to live near Dartmoor and up on the top of the moor there was a particular spot that I liked to sit where, if you were lucky and it was a clear day, you could see for miles and miles.

Places like that, or maybe places next to the sea, on top of cliffs, or even, on broad sandy beaches, are often described as 'thin places'. Places of clarity. Places where it seems like we are just a little bit closer to heaven. Sometimes, it almost feels as if we stretched out our hand, that we could indeed touch heaven. Those are places where we can feel closer to God.

We are very fortunate that we own a house in north Norfolk. It is a place that in normal circumstances I would visit regularly. It is one of the things that I have really missed during lockdown as there is a particular beach, where it really feels like you can exhale the stuff of the world and breathe in the presence of God.

But we are all different. Each of us wonderfully and fearfully made in the image of God, so those thin places will be different for each of us. So, I think that is our first challenge for today. Where is our thin place? Where is the place where we experience the closeness of God? Where are our thin places in this time of lockdown?

Today's Gospel reading was about a thin place, a place up a mountain, where the gap between heaven and earth literally ceased to be. We sometimes talk about 'mountain top experiences' even if they didn't happen up a mountain - those experiences that lead to transformation. Our 'mountain top experiences' are moments of epiphany, of revelation and transformation. I wonder if you've ever had that type of experience.

Mountain top experiences are important in the history of the people of God. Noah's Ark resting on Mount Ararat, Moses coming into God's presence on Mount Sinai. Elijah hearing the still small voice of Calm. The Psalmist describing 'an awesome God who is worshipped on God's holy mountain'. The sermon on the mount, today's story of Jesus' transfiguration, and his glorious ascension. All moments of epiphany, revelation and transformation.

Our gospel reading takes place soon after Jesus tells his disciples the devastating news that he is going to die, but will rise again. Jesus takes Peter, John, and James and goes up on the mountain to pray. In the solitude of that holy mountain, with its long, sweeping vistas and its cold, clean air, Jesus' prayer grows into an intense mountain top experience. Jesus was transfigured before them and his face shone like the sun, his clothes became dazzling white and Moses and Elijah were there with Jesus. As the disciples witnessed the transfiguration of Jesus in that mountain-top, thin place, they made the connection between Jesus, Moses and Elijah as they saw the glory of God revealed in Jesus. Moses, the law-giver, Elijah the prophet, confirming that Jesus was the fulfilment of everything that the law and the prophets had promised. Jesus had come not to abolish the law and the prophets but to fulfil them. Jesus is transformed by the love that sustains the universe. The glory of God so completely embraced Jesus that who he really is, who he has *always* been, is briefly revealed to the disciples.

The disciples want to capture the moment in the only way they know how, to bring it down to a human level, they understood that this experience was an encounter with God. Peter, that most human of all the disciples, suggests erecting a building to house the presence of God. A building so they can all stay in that thin place.

I wonder if that's something that we all do from time to time. To try and contain the glory and presence of God, we try to put God, the creator of all heaven and earth, into an easily understood package of religiosity. But God is so much more than we can ever imagine or understand.

Then, a voice came from heaven to tell them “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” When they looked again, Jesus was alone, the moment had passed and Jesus brings them back to reality and urges them onwards - get up, don't be afraid. He doesn't want them to stop on the mountain-top, amazing as the experience is, but he wants them to be changed by this experience of encountering him in his transfigured form. To be changed by the knowledge that Jesus is the Messiah, and to get up and to make their way back down the mountain into everyday life, equipped with the knowledge that Jesus is the one that humanity has been waiting for.

That shared moment of revelation, that experience of closeness to God was just for them alone at that time. Some theologians describe the transfiguration as a bridge between Jesus' public ministry and his Passion. It is after the Transfiguration that Jesus sets his face towards Jerusalem and the cross. It is only later on when the disciples have crossed that bridge with Jesus. Only after they have experienced the devastation of the crucifixion, that the disciples shared the experience with others. Their mountain-top experience had been part of their journey of transformation from disciples to apostles.

Sometimes it can be like that for us too - we only realise that we have seen the revelation of God's glory until sometime later. As a clergy friend puts it - it's only when we look back, that we see our footprints set within God's narrative. Mountain-top experiences, experiencing God's glory, can even be overwhelming so we too, like the disciples, might just want to stay just enjoy it. Or we might find the experience overwhelming. But we can be encouraged that Jesus reassures us, and tells us to get up, not to be afraid, and to come down the mountain as his disciples and witnesses.

Malcolm Guite, poet, priest and theologian describes the Transfiguration, as being given in order to sustain the disciples through the darkness that would lead to Good Friday. Malcolm's sonnet called Transfiguration is written, imaging the voice of a disciple looking back at the Transfiguration from Good Friday.

For that one moment, 'in and out of time',
on that one mountain where all moments meet,
the daily veil that covers the sublime
in darkling glass fell dazzled at his feet.
There were no angels full of eyes and wings
just living glory full of truth and grace.
The Love that dances at the heart of things
shone out upon us from a human face
and to that light the light in us leaped up,
we felt it quicken somewhere deep within,
a sudden blaze of long-extinguished hope
trembled and tingled through the tender skin.
Nor can this blackened sky, this darkened scar
eclipse that glimpse of how things really are.

So, I wonder, can our encounter with the story of Jesus' transfiguration sustain us through our journey of Lent?

Can we come into the presence of God and let the dynamic, creative presence of the Holy Spirit light us up as the eternal makes itself known to us? And may we reflect God's glory as we seek to share the truth of the life, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ in our hurting world. In Jesus' name. Amen.