

Up and Down the Mountain

A sermon on Mark 9:2-9 by the Revd Karen Quah, 11 February 2024

Today I will be taking us on the journey that Jesus took Peter, James and John on - Up the mountain where he was transfigured, and down again, in the Gospel of Mark. Hence, my message is called Up and Down the Mountain.

1. C.S. Lewis – Humans Are Amphibians

- In The Screwtape Letters, a satirical set of letters between two devils, C.S. Lewis explains a principal truth about human beings: *"Humans are amphibians—half spirit and half animal. [...] As spirits they belong to the eternal world, but as animals they inhabit time. This means that while their spirit can be directed to an eternal object, their bodies, passions, and imaginations are in continual change, for to be in time means to change."*
- By "amphibians," Lewis means that humans have both a body and a soul/spirit, belonging to different "surroundings". The trouble comes when we forget we have both or forget that they're not entirely separate.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the account of the transfiguration of Jesus – who was both Jesus the Son of Man, the son of Mary and Joseph and Jesus the Son of God, conceived by the Holy Spirit, the Christ

2. The Transfiguration Event in the Synoptic Gospels

- In each of the Synoptic Gospels the transfiguration is recorded as an event. Not a vision or a dream. But something extraordinary that happened on a mountain top, in the clouds – noting that theophanies / manifestations of God are often linked in the Bible to clouds.
- And so, the transfiguration is a high mountain event – an event in which we find the awesome manifestation of God in and through Jesus the Son of Man, and the Son of God.

3. BEFORE Going Up the Mountain

- Just before this, in Chapter 8 of Mark's Gospel, a host of things have happened. Short recap: 1) Jesus performs miracles 2) he warns the disciples of the Pharisees and Herod 2) Peter declares Jesus as the Messiah 3) Peter rebukes Jesus for predicting his own

death which Jesus calls Peter "Satan" 5) Jesus teaches the crowd and his disciples about the sacrificial way of the cross.

- But then, at the start of Chapter 9, Jesus says the most curious thing – *"Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see that the kingdom of God has come with power."*

Whatever does he mean?

4. Going up the mountain

- Well, we don't find out straight away, but 6 days later, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John with him – Why just them? Some say it's because they were his favourites. But we don't really know for sure.
- For now, Jesus leads them up the mountain. The further up they climb, the further away the crowds seem, and the high priests and teachers of the law, Herod and the Romans, the other disciples... The air gets crisper. The trees and sky and wilderness, vaster. And the sound of heckling crowds down below is replaced by the sound of wild creatures, squawking birds, perhaps the soft whisper of the wind, a brooding mist... Up and up they climb until at last, they're there - closer to the clouds than they've ever been.
- And Luke, in his Gospel, tells us they are sleepy. Their legs probably aching from the uphill trek, their sandaled feet sore and dusty. It's been a long day and they're nodding off.

5. Mountaintop – Elijah and Moses

- But this is when it happens, the extraordinary. High on the mountaintop, in the clouds - Jesus, the rabbi from Nazareth who's worn the same clothes day after day, is transformed. Matthew tells us – *His face shines like the sun Mark - V.3 His clothes become dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them – bright as a flash of lightning (Luke 9:29)*
- And then, as if this isn't enough, who should appear but Moses and Elijah. And they're talking to Jesus. What about? Mark doesn't tell us, but Luke does. The two heroes of Israel are speaking to Jesus about his departure *"which he [is] about to bring into fulfilment at Jerusalem"* (Luke 9:32)
- Peter, James, and John have been asleep and now, fully awake, they see it - Jesus fully transformed in the light – the glory of the kingdom of God, speaking to none other than Elijah and Moses!

Questions - Firstly, how do the disciples know that it's Elijah and Moses? Do they have pictures of them? Does Jesus introduce them? Or is it a knowing that they have deep in their soul, in their spirit? Secondly, what in the world is going through their minds right now?

6. Mountaintop – Peter's reaction

- Well, they're frightened, we know that much. Even if Mark doesn't inform us of this in parenthesis, we get an inkling from Peter's response as they are leaving - V.5 *"Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters – one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah."* So random! So much so that Luke adds in his Gospel that Peter didn't know what he was saying.
- I think that many biblical scholars are bit tough on the disciples. They moan how the disciples don't get it. How thick they are, how slow on the uptake. I don't think that's fair. Who's to say that we might not, do not respond in pretty much the same way when the extraordinary happens before our eyes, when we are fortunate enough to catch a glimpse of God in our everyday lives. It takes time to process this sort of thing. It takes time for our cultural/time-constrained/human side to align with our boundless/infinite/spiritual side.
- Peter, James, and John must recognize the sheer magnitude of what is taking place. But they're scrambling – mentally, emotionally, spiritually. And who can blame them? Mountaintop experiences are astounding events that can take weeks, months, even years to process. Julian of Norwich, for instance, took a lifetime to reflect on the 16 divine revelations that she received on her deathbed before being miraculously healed from the plague!
- Now, although all 3 of the disciples are stunned, only Peter – God bless him - offers a verbal response. His impulse is to offer some act of worship – which isn't exactly wrong. But the nature of the action tells us that Peter has missed the point. All he can come up with is a possible fulfillment of Israel's Feast of Tabernacles, where the Israelites made tents to remember God's provision and to look forward to the coming of the kingdom. It makes sense to worship God in this way. But Peter has made the mistake of putting Jesus on the same par as Moses and Elijah.

- Though again, it's not hard to see why Peter would do this – After all, the two prophets were also summoned for similar mountaintop events. Moses on Mount Sinai receiving from God the ten commandments and hearing God speak to him from a cloud, and Elijah on Mount Horeb encountering God not in the wind or earthquake or fire but in the still small voice of God. Moses's experience was especially relevant, since it resulted in his own transformation, with his face shining so brightly the Israelites had to cover it with a veil.

7. Mountaintop – The Significance of the Transfiguration

- But Jesus wasn't shining the way Moses had. His was more than a reflected glory; it was the glory of "*the kingdom of God*." Six days before, Jesus informed his disciples that some amongst them would not experience death before they saw "that the kingdom of God had come with power." Many scholars believe this was it, and I tend to agree.
- As Joseph Ratzinger who became Pope Benedict XVI noted - "Jesus [unlike Moses in [Exodus 34](#)] shines from within; he does not simply receive light, but he himself is light from light." Moses came down the mountain having encountered the glory of God. Jesus is on the mountain, glory from glory, light from light.
- The transfiguration is therefore, not only a preview of the future – the end of time or the resurrection to come - It is also a glimpse into eternity past at "the glory that Christ had with the Father before the world existed" ([John 17:5](#)) It is a glimpse at the glory which remained immutably in the possession of Christ, but that lay hidden in the humble exterior of the human suffering servant prophesied in the book of Isaiah. Jesus is not merely the next Moses, the next Elijah – he is the fulfilment of the law and the prophets, of Moses and Elijah – he is the ultimate Moses and the ultimate Elijah.

8. Mountaintop – The Father's Rebuke

- And this might explain why as soon as Peter makes his random misguided suggestion, they are wrapped in a cloud, and a voice

from it speaks – it is the voice of God the Father who says – V.7
"This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"

- V.8 when they look around, they no longer see anyone with them except Jesus. It's just like it was before, the three of them and Jesus.

9. Down The Mountain

- And now, it's time to come down the mountain. They emerge from the clouds different but the same. Each descending step returning them closer and closer, back to reality – the crowds, the enemies, their ministry, their calling...
- As they descend, Jesus orders them not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man has risen from the dead. Of course, they have no idea what he means. And how frustrating it must be for them not to be able to share what they've seen.
- But we, who have the privilege of hindsight, know Jesus means - that first, he, the Son of Man, must be arrested, persecuted, and killed before they and everyone else have seen him rise from the dead.
- Who is this Son of Man? Jesus refers to himself as the "Son of Man" 14 times in Mark's Gospel. Do the disciples grasp the significance of Jesus' self-title here? The prophet Daniel in 7:13-14 saw "one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven" – This was the Son of Man.
- High on the mountaintop - God the Father informed Peter, James and John that Jesus is *His* Son – the Divine and Eternal Son of God. And now as they come down the mountain, Jesus also informs them that he is the Son of Man as envisioned in Daniel, God in human form.
- Jesus is the ultimate amphibian – And Peter, John, and James are the first to witness this first-hand.

10. Making Sense of Their Mountaintop Moment

- In a way, this is when the real work begins. How will they make sense of what they've seen and heard? How will they work their mountaintop experience into their everyday bottom-of-the-mountain lives? What difference will the transfiguration of Jesus into the glory of the kingdom of God make in their lives and in the world around them?

- If we read on, we might be inclined to answer “none at all”. Peter goes on to deny Jesus 3 times, all the disciples abandon him, they don’t even believe Mary Magdalene when she rushes from the empty tomb to give them the good news.
- But if we read on to the book of Acts and the Pentecost, we will find the glory of the kingdom of God at work through the disciples and those like Paul and Mary Magdalene who had encountered their own mountaintop experiences – glimpses of God. We may note also a gospel, an apocalyptic book, and a couple of letters written by two of the eyewitnesses of the transfiguration – Peter and John.

11. Making Sense of our mountaintop moments A

- This brings the transfiguration to us. We may not have literally scaled heights, but symbolically, many of us will have or will have heard of someone encountering a mountaintop experience - glimpse of God – a personal encounter with God in some way or another. How this translates into our everyday lives is up to us as we pray, reflect and lead on the Spirit’s guiding.

12. Making Sense of our mountaintop moments B

- In my work as a Community Chaplain, I’ve recently had the privilege of ministering to someone who’s had such an experience. (She’s given me permission to share her story) A woman who was an alcoholic. Dying. In hospital, the priest was called to give her the last rites. As she was waiting in bed for the priest to arrive, she saw a vision – a vision of light - she knew somehow it was Jesus. Then, a kind nurse appeared and told her she would live – later she discovered that this nurse hadn’t even been on duty. But this woman who was practically dead, suddenly came to life. By the time the priest arrived, he was no longer needed. Over months, her body has slowly healed, and even though she continues to receive transfusions for her liver, the doctors have declared her a miracle.
- As someone who had a mountaintop experience, she wants desperately for it to count. She wants to learn more about Jesus who healed her, she wants to learn more about what happened – not just for the sake of it, but so she can find out what she’s supposed to do with it.

13. Conclusion

- As Christians, those of us in whom Christ lives through the power of the Spirit, we have no excuse. If we look deep enough beneath the surface, we will find glimpses of God in our ordinary lives.
 - The transfiguration is a reminder to us that we exist both body and soul – That we are both mortal, time-bound - and by the Spirit of Christ in us, we also bear something of the eternal glory of God.
 - The transfiguration reminds us that in and through Jesus, the perfect Son of God and the perfect Son of Man, we each have the potential to experience and to be glimpses of God who is the true agent of change in our lives and in the world.
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