

Transfiguration Sunday - 2nd March 2014 – Wesley Uniting

Theme: “Mountain top experiences”

Readings: Exodus 24:12-18 ‘The covenant confirmed’
Matthew 17: 1-9 ‘ Jesus’ transfiguration’

Introduction

Mountaineering is much loved by many. Climbing tall mountains, cliff faces, vertical challenges all give to some an adrenalin rush that in itself justifies the action for many. Do we have any here who love the ‘rush’ of mountain climbing or abseiling? For those who love this they have a list of mountains, gorges etc to climb or abseil during their lifetime. For some it becomes an obsession and they live for each adventure. However, in Biblical terms, mountains were often seen as places to be ‘closer to God’ and the clouds, the thunder and the lightning symbolised the ‘presence of God’ on those mountains. In particular, Mt Sinai and Mt Hermon were two of the holy mountains for the Jewish people. I have only seen Mt Sinai from the air as I’ve flown in a military chopper on the Egyptian side of the Israeli/ Egyptian border in the Sinai. They are part of the ‘moonscape’ that you see in that part of the world - rugged, desolate and forbidding as you look at it from above. In some ways it seems ‘lifeless’ because it is so barren and rocky. Yet here is the setting for the receiving of the commandments of old, as Moses encountered God on Mt Sinai and received what we call the Ten Commandments and then in today’s reading from Exodus 24, Moses has this further encounter with God that confirms the commandments and the covenant relationship between God and the people of Israel. We see in this reading the cloud on the mountain, the consuming fire that indicated God’s presence to the people in the fact of fire and brightness. Also we read that Moses stayed there for a long period of time (the wording of 40 days and 40 nights indicates a long period of time and this imagery is used in many parts of Scripture). Even with Jesus this time line is used for the period he spent ‘in the desert’ preparing himself for his ministry and working through the manner of ministry that he would conduct. It is with this background that we come to the reading from the Gospel for today, which is a jump from the teachings of Jesus that we have been looking at over the past few weeks from parts of the Sermon on the Mount.

Why the jump in our Lectionary readings – well it is almost the beginning of Lent, that period of six weeks that begins next Wednesday night with our Ash Wednesday service at 7pm, where we turn our thoughts to Jesus journeying towards Jerusalem and ultimately his death on the cross.

However for today let us take a few moments to think about the Transfiguration and reflect on that for ourselves.

The Transfiguration – Matthew 17:1-9

The account of the Transfiguration is in all three Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke. All three accounts have Peter, James and John accompanying Jesus up the mountain which we believe was probably Mt Hermon (although some scholars suggest Mt Tabor) which was just northeast of Caesarea Philippi.

It links Jesus with the great Jewish prophets of the past, Moses – the lawgiver, and Elijah, the greatest of the OT prophets, who encountered God on mountains. As we have already read today, Moses encountered God on Mt Sinai and Elijah encountered God on Mt Horeb (1 Kgs 19:8).

Also there is the affirmation of Jesus from a voice within the clouds (accepted as the voice of God) which uses words very similar to those at Jesus' baptism:

“This is my Son, whom I love;
with him I am well pleased.
Listen to him!” vs 5b

In Matthew's account, the transfiguration, which literally means a 'metamorphous' from the Greek word 'metamorphoomai' and here Jesus' face shone like the sun and his clothes became as white as light'. In this setting he encountered Moses and Elijah. We don't exactly know what happened, but it was a pivotal time not only for Jesus but for the three disciples who accompanied him.

For Jesus it gave him a certainty of his mission to head towards Jerusalem and all that would mean – his arrest, crucifixion, death and then his resurrection.

For the three disciples it gave them a certainty of who Jesus was so that after his resurrection they could and would witness to what happened on the mountain to clarify that Jesus was the Son of God, the promised Messiah and Saviour. It strengthened their faith and Jesus' resolve in his ministry.

For us today

Probably, for us today, this all seems a little strange.

However, we still use the terminology 'a mountain top experience' or a 'pivotal moment' in our life.

Take a couple of seconds and think of 'mountain top experiences' or 'pivotal moments' in your life – what have been those turning points for you?

For some of us, it may be bringing a new life, like Molly-Ann, into the world.

It could be the choice of a career path.

It could be finding a partner in life.

It could be your own experience of encountering God that changes your outlook on life itself.

It could be a life experience that you hadn't expected.

It could be a negative, with an illness diagnosed or the loss of some-one dear to you.

It could be experiencing something that you never thought was possible.

'Mountain top experiences' that stay with you for life and change, metamorphose, your entire being.

This is what we celebrate today, in a Christian sense, the experience that occurred on that mountain so long ago that galvanised Jesus on his mission and a few of his disciples on the continuing mission of God's church.

Here we celebrate that God is not simply confined to places of worship but that God is active in and through all aspects of the world.

We also acknowledge that we are never sure when and where God may encounter us. In all our lives the bright light of God may suddenly illuminate our paths, when we least expect it, and call us to be more faithful to the ways of Christ – the gift of love given for all of us.

Praise be to God for this word for us today. Amen.