

2<sup>nd</sup> March 2025 – Transfiguration Sunday

**Luke 9:28-36**

**A-CROSS THE MOUNTAINS AND VALLEYS OF LIFE**

For many of us, there's just something about mountains, isn't there? We love those high points where we can look out over vast stretches of land, where the air seems fresher and the sun seems to shine brighter, even though it's hard to say if that's in our mind or it is reality, or probably a mixture of both. Most of what we call 'mountains' are probably hills or rises, but we still look to them in the distance as places of peace, contemplation, even safety. As good as valleys are, and they are normally the places which provide us with our food and shelter, and where we live most of our lives, the high points are the places people have always sought for safety and security; you can see enemies coming, and those who wish to attack you will find it harder to do so if they have to move upward. Many a military battle has been fought over gaining control of the high ground. On the other hand, Psalm 23 talks about going through the 'valley of death', or, 'valleys as dark as death', depending on the translation you use. So, many people over the years have lived in the valleys, where a living can be made, but looked up to the high places with awe and tried to experience that feeling of peace and security up there when they can.

Not surprising then, mountains and high places also play a large part in both the Old Testament and the Gospel stories with Jesus, as they do in the practices of many other religions also. We know that people like Noah, Moses, and many others went up on the mountain to worship, make sacrifices, and be with God. Maybe that is in part because being on a higher place they felt closer to God, but perhaps it was also because from a high vantage point they experienced the same feelings of peace, serenity, comfort and security that we do today; to go up means to both symbolically and literally remove yourself from the troubles of the valley for a while. And in Jesus' life, so many times we are told He went up on a mountain to pray and for quiet time with God, especially times when He found Himself under pressure or when He was about to face a significant event or change of course in His life. The valleys are where

we live and carry out what we are here for, the mountains where we go to be rested, guided, strengthened and revitalised to do that living of life.

Every year, on the Sunday before Ash Wednesday, we celebrate the event in Jesus' life we call the 'Transfiguration' - when Jesus went up on a mountain to pray before He began the journey to Jerusalem and His death there. While He is on this mountain with three of His disciples, Jesus is transformed into dazzling white, reflecting the glory of God, and joined by two of the 'greats' of the Old Testament, Moses and Elijah. As well as being an account of Jesus going through the ups and downs on the road of life, just like we do, it's also a crossroad event where many parts of God's plan and Jesus' life now come together. The presence of Moses and Elijah, two men who both also saw God and who represent the Law and the Prophets who foretold Jesus' life and death, affirm for Jesus, the disciples, and us, that what Jesus was about to go through is what had been spoken about to the people throughout the Old Testament. The voice which comes and says, 'This is my chosen Son', is one of only two times God directly speaks in the Gospels, the other being at Jesus' baptism. Just like God spoke at the beginning of Jesus' ministry to affirm Him in the ministry He was about to undertake, He now does the same as Jesus prepares to do what He was sent to do; die for us. And with the disciples falling asleep while Jesus is praying, we are reminded that these same three would do the same thing when Jesus prayed in Garden of Gethsemane on the night before He died; it's hard for Jesus' followers to stick with Him on the path He has to take. As an account of Jesus' life it is perfectly placed to have it just before Lent, as we remember that while Jesus did come to bring God's glory to earth and to our lives, the path He took to get there was to walk also through the lowest parts of our lives right up to the cross.

There is a lot in this account, and we talk about it at this time each year, but something which Luke's account perhaps brings out more than the other Gospels is that it deals with Jesus' identity, with who He is, and what that means for Him, and what it now means for us. In Luke, just before Jesus goes up the mountain, He asks the disciples the question, 'What do people say about me?' (v. 18), and then, 'But who do you say I am?' (v. 20). Jesus then goes on to tell the disciples that He will be rejected and killed, and that His followers will be called to give up themselves and even their lives in following Him;

following Jesus means going the way of the cross, not glory. And then, immediately after He comes down from the mountain, a man comes to tell Jesus that his son is possessed by a demon but Jesus' disciples were unable to force it out of Him. Jesus attacks the disciples for their lack of faith in being able to do this; they still didn't get who Jesus is or what He had come to do. And of course, for Jesus, while He is on the mountain He meets and talks with Moses and Elijah, and we assume that was about Him receiving strength and encouragement from them, and He receives that verbal affirmation and comfort that He is God's Chosen One. 'Who do you say I am?', Jesus asked the disciples. After what is before, after, and in this account, we can now say with them; you are God's Son, the Saviour who was sent to die and rise again to save all people. You are the One who knows God's glory in the experiences of the mountains, but who also knows what it is to live the realities of life as you walk to the cross through the valleys. And, as your followers, you both call us and give us the power to follow you and do your work also. You are the One who can call and lead us to the glory of the mountains, but also is with us, guiding us, protecting us, as we go through the valleys.

What does that mean for us? We like the mountains, don't we, not just the physical high places we can look out on which give us those feelings we talked about before, but also the high points, the joys of our lives. The times spent with people we want to be with, doing things we want to be doing. Celebrating achievements. Relaxing or taking time out. Going on a good holiday. What are the 'high' times for you, the ones you look forward to, and don't want to finish? It's natural to seek out these times, and to want to hold on to them; just like Peter wanted to build three shelters to keep the time of glory he and others were a part of with Jesus, we also both seek out and want to keep the high times in our lives. That's natural. Looking towards and looking back on these times is often what helps us get through life. And it's the same with our relationship with God; we naturally want to hold on to an uplifting time of worship, or prayer or Bible reading when we feel particularly close to God. We want to be able to see God making the path smooth and easy for us and those we love. Like the disciples, we don't want to hear or think about that even when we have faith we are still called to go through the valleys of both faith and life, but, just like with Jesus, it is those times which lead us to fulfilling and knowing God's glory

and what that ultimately means for us. As we know the cross, we walk the way of the cross, across the mountains and valleys of life.

So, what then are your valleys? Times of grief, sadness, worry, conflict, concern, depression, doubt, struggle, uncertainty. Many of those things, and more, which pop up in our lives regularly. And, if Jesus only came for the highs and to walk the way of glory, it's at these times we feel all of those things even more, because we wouldn't have Jesus' love, comfort and strength to be with us through them. Instead, we'd be looking up to those high points, those peaks of life which can seem so far away and unattainable, and we'd know that we have no hope of reaching them by ourselves. But Jesus, on His way to the cross, on His way to save us, came down to the valley, to the stuff of life we go through every day, to be with us. Because, in love, He took this road, we know that His love, forgiveness and comfort are with us in both the highs and the lows we go through in our lives.

Hold on to the mountains, the high points, in life, whether that is physical high places, or the events, happenings, people, activities, which make you feel on top of the world. But we know to, that in both faith and life, these mountain top experiences aren't what we will always have each day. As we begin Lent, a time to focus on Jesus' death on the cross and what it means for us, we can thank God that because Jesus, as our Saviour, God's Chosen One, took this path through the valley to the cross, we can now follow Him, and find comfort and strength in Him, as we walk this path in this life we now live for Him also. Amen.

### **FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION**

- What are the highs, the mountaintop experiences of your life: Physically? Emotionally? Spiritually? Do you ever try to hold on to them, and if so, how?
- What are the lows, valley experiences, which you go through? What or who helps you through them? Do any of them feel too overwhelming for you right now so that you are struggling with them?
- Think about what it means that Jesus, the Son of God, our Saviour, came not just to bring us God's glory, but also to walk through the valleys, our valleys, to the cross. How can knowing this give us comfort and strength in our lives?

Pray: thank God for the highs you know and experience, and for the enjoyment you receive from them. Bring to God the 'valleys' or lows which you struggle with in your life, and ask for His comfort and strength as you walk the way of the cross with Him.

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