

## On the mountain top

A sermon preached by the *Jo Drew* at the 8.00am and the 12.00 noon services at St Peter's, Wolvercote on Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> March 2011

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*Exodus ch.24, vv.12 – end; 2 Peter ch.1, vv.16 -end and Matthew, ch.17, vv.1 - 9.*

I love mountains! And perhaps it is of no coincidence that I left the South to study at a university that was close to good walking terrain and beautiful scenery. This led fortuitously to career opportunities that enabled me to live, and work, on the edge of the Lake District for over 20 years. During this time I became in tune with the seasons as I worked on environmental and nature conservation projects.

On a retreat break in Wales, a few years ago, I had the privilege of staying in a tiny studio. I arrived at night, in the dark, and when I woke up I looked out from a large patio style window to the view. I could see nothing. Just thick dense cloud. I had absolutely no idea what the landscape was like at all. So I made a cup of tea, sat down, and waited patiently for all to be revealed.

Each of the Bible passages read today refers to mountains and this made me think about how mountains seem to be integral within our Christian tradition, and indeed, scriptural accounts. In our Exodus reading we encountered Moses as he is summoned up Mount Sinai for an encounter with God. After a little research about Mount Sinai I discovered that it was formerly considered of no particular significance. It was one of many mountains lost within the most barren rocky landscape of Southern Sinai. One nun living in the St Catherine Monastery situated by the mountain stated 'that it is neither the highest mountain in the region (as a 7,498 foot peak taking three hours to climb following the Path of Moses, a stairway of nearly 4,000 steps); nor the most spectacular. There is no soaring heaven reaching apex and it is rare to see anything resembling a divine cluster of cloud hugging its peak. Were it not for a single overwhelming belief that has endured for over fifteen centuries, Mount Sinai would probably be a topographical footnote'. But this is the mountain, of former inconsequence, that God selected to speak to Moses and as is written in Exodus 'where he gave him the tablets of stone with the law and commandment, which was written with instruction' (Exodus 24: 12).

What must Moses have felt as he embarked upon his climb up the mountain, initially with Joshua, and then alone? And as he sat in solitude on the mountain within the cloud and darkness for six days what was he thinking? Was this a time of fearful apprehension? Did it test his faith or prayer? But from the very moment when he saw the glory of the Lord 'like a devouring fire on top of the mountain', also seen by the people of Israel below, the event instantly transformed the mountain into a site of religious significance for people on earth. A place of pilgrimage, worship and hope.

The Matthew reading also vividly describes another transformational 'mountain top' experience. Jesus, after speaking to his disciples of the difficult road that he must take to the cross and his coming heavenly glory, asks John, James and Peter to accompany him up a

holy mountain. He then presents a startling vision of transfiguration where his face and body was bathed in translucent light before being accompanied by Moses known as the law giver and Elijah the prophet.

It is hard to imagine the disciple's emotions as they heard God words which led them to fall prostrate in fear. They had just seen the two most important figures of Israel's ancient heritage. Moses, the man who brought them the Ten Commandments and law from Mount Sinai and Elijah, the prophet who had heard Gods still quiet voice on a mountain and known as a 'roadmaker' and herald for the coming of God. Now the disciples had seen their master in the company of two great figures who had, in effect, laid the foundations of their faith and endorsed Jesus' ministry. Along with the words of God they had witnessed a merging of the Old with the New but also of that to come.

Fear is an emotion that can paralyse. The disciples, on the mountain, may have experienced various states of shock, confusion and disbelief. At any transitional stage of life there is often a period of 'cloudiness' where things do not seem straightforward; where the path is not clear. I went to Wales because I had been struggling with a fearful situation. My calling to ministry was becoming stronger and stronger. I could not ignore or avoid it any longer. But one particular issue was frightening me and it was this that could only be lifted up to the Lord. I was upset and confused. But throughout the days at the studio I read passages of the Bible that spoke to me and which addressed and calmed my fear as I called to the Lord, through the Word and prayer, to guide and strengthen me.

Peter emphasises that all would do well to be attentive to the prophetic message. He states - 'we have the words of the prophets made more certain and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts' - 1 Pet 1:19. A testament, by an eye witness, that the events were reality and not myth and that the words would dispel darkness, fear and ignorance. A haze would be lifted as faith and hope lead Christian peoples into the light. But this leaves us all with a challenge. It often requires great faithfulness to endure the dark times of our lives. Unexpected events may devastate or cloud our judgement but our Christian tradition has provided ample evidence, through scripture and the lives of saints and many Christians before us, that disturbing situations can, and will through the word, prayer and faith, become life changing and transformational. It may still be scary and take us out of our comfort zones but through faith it is possible.

Back at the studio I watched the cloud lifting gradually to reveal an unknown landscape. A small mountain emerged from the base of an estuary and over time the light from the water refracted with the sunlight that radiated over the top of the mountain bathing it in translucent light. I was left thinking that beneath the cloud or darkness the light is always revealed in God's own time as a lamp to light our way. My fear was revealed in its clarity. It was the public speaking aspect of ministry that paralysed me but once this was revealed progress could begin as I sought advice and assistance and I speak today as a testament of how transformation can take place by incremental steps even though it may feel as

daunting as the Path of Moses on Mount Sinai! But - we must remain faithful always trusting, throughout good and bad times, in the Lords mercy and grace. Amen.