

Life with Jesus and mountaintop experience 2 Kings 2.1-12; Psalm 50.1-6; 2 Cor 4.3-6; Mark 9.2-9

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Your life and my life, in many ways they resemble the world economy. It is one long sequence (hopefully long) of ups and downs. And sadly, the mountaintops seem to never last long enough and the deep valleys are always lengthy. The gospel story we have read describes an amazing mountaintop experience of the Lord Jesus Christ and three of his disciples, Peter, James and John.

GLORIOUS EVENT

Jesus took his closest followers with Him on a mountain retreat, and there they had a very special experience – an event that lasted only a short time, but it was so intense and special to them that they have left us a description of what happened there.

We have read the story from the gospel of St Mark; Mark got this story of the transfiguration on the mountain straight from the horse's mouth, that is from Peter. Church traditions say that Mark was the interpreter of Peter at the time when Peter was in Rome. That is when Mark noted down the stories Peter told his audiences.

So what Mark writes about this event is nothing less than the transcript of the account of the prime eyewitness.

St Luke in his Gospel relates *why* Jesus went up the mountain with his three disciples – it was because He wanted to pray. Jesus wanted to speak with his Father because of the very difficult journey ahead of Him. The valley of the shadow of death lay ahead.

And when Jesus began to speak with his Father, extraordinary things happened. Here we see the Son of God briefly in his actual glory – the glory He had with his Father before He came to earth and the glory He would have again when he returned to his Father.

Awe-inspiring to see Jesus transfigured in shining light, and beside this, Moses and Elijah appeared for a summit meeting with Jesus. Moses and Elijah are known for their *own* mountaintop experiences.

Moses was with God on mount Sinai, and there he received the law of God, in the midst of lightning and thunder and brightness and clouds. For Israel, Moses represented the law; he was also the lead man for Israel's exodus out of Egypt into the Promised Land. The founding father of the nation of Israel.

And Elijah was Israel's greatest prophet. He is famous for what he did on the top of Mount Carmel, where he defeated the prophets of the Middle Eastern god Baal, when God send fire and lightning from heaven.

St Luke says that the three disciples were sleepy but they became fully awake. No wonder. They were scared to death by the brightness of the event – the awesome presence of God.

Mark says: they were terrified. Peter had told him this; he was an honest man and did not embellish the event. The event was great, but the three disciples looked foolish. They were scared to death.

Peter and his mates were scared to death – and Peter was, it seems, rather clueless about what he actually saw. He saw, but did not get it straight.

RESPONSE OF PETER

'Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah'. Mark says: He did not know what to say, they were so afraid.

There are smart people who hide their lack of knowledge and wisdom by zipping their lips. That creates at least a semblance of wisdom. I am a slow learner in this respect, and I feel comforted – I am in the blessed company of St Peter. He should have kept his mouth, as fear and ignorance are not a great source for coming up with wise statements....

Three dwellings – the original Greek speaks of tents. Many theologians think that this event of the transfiguration on the mountain actually took place during the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles, when every Jewish family would build a hut in his backyard or on his roof, and eat and celebrate and sleep in that hut for a whole week - to remember the exodus from Egypt.

They would remember God's provision in the desert, in that valley of death, and how God led them into the promised land. As the feast coincided with the end of the fruit harvest, it was a joyful feast. They also reminded one another, while sitting in their huts, that even though today may be often miserable, one day God will re-create this world to be a paradise.

So Peter's immediate response was: Lord, let us create three of those huts. Maybe he was convinced that this moment on the mountain, this moment of glory with Moses, Elijah and Jesus, was actually the inauguration of that expected perfect kingdom of God. He hoped to prolong the mountaintop experience, forever.

THREE MISTAKES OF PETER

Peter, I think, made three mistakes with his response.

Mistake one

In general terms, I think the idea to prolong mountaintop experiences with God is doomed to fail. As soon as you start to focus on the experience, it is like water in your hands – you lose it quickly.

Such an experience occurs mostly at unexpected moments and not because you look for it, but because God gives it in his goodness. They are rare moments that cannot be created, or prolonged, and that makes them actually so unique. They are gracious donations by God.

Mistake two

The idea to maintain the *status quo* with Moses, Elijah and Jesus was the second mistake of Peter, as it was directly in opposition to God's plans with Jesus.

Jesus was on the way to Jerusalem and God gave Him this summit meeting with Moses and Elijah to prepare him for the valley ahead of him. Moses and Elijah spoke about his departure, says Luke. His departure, in Greek, is literally *his exodus*. Moses and Elijah confirmed to Jesus: that valley of death ahead of you, to be killed in Jerusalem, is the real exodus, much greater than the exodus of Moses.

It does not just bring people from country A to country B, but it leads the world from the situation of separation from God, to a life in eternity with the Creator.

And this is what Peter with his suggestion wanted to avoid. He wanted the Kingdom NOW. No pain, no suffering, but immediate blessings. 'Lord, this is a good place. Let us stay here. Let this experience of God's presence be permanent. Let us not go any further to Jerusalem...'

What a great idea, life as one long mountaintop experience. The mountain of transfiguration is always more enjoyable than the valleys of life... It is always more pleasant to experience mountaintops than to face daily life and its problems.

But the glory of the transfiguration on this mountain must be seen in conjunction with the glory of Jesus on the mountain of Golgotha. The route to the eternal kingdom of God cannot bypass that mountain of pain and death. That was true for Jesus... and I think it is true for us until His Kingdom has finally come.

Our mountaintops may energize us, and they are vivid reminders, milestones, that point us to the better things that are to come. But in the meantime, life can often be dark and grim, and the summit-experiences few and short. A painful example of this is the life of Mother Theresa. After her death, some of her correspondence was revealed in the book *Come be my light*.

This woman who was so much the face of true service to God, has struggled for decades with the absence of any mountaintop experience. That absence seems to have started at almost precisely the time she began tending the poor and dying in Calcutta, and — except for a five-week break in 1959 — never abated.

Although perpetually cheery in public, Mother Teresa actually lived in a state of deep and abiding spiritual pain. In many letters she speaks of the 'dryness', 'darkness', 'loneliness' and 'torture' she was undergoing. She compares the experience to hell and at one point says it has driven her to doubt the existence of heaven and even of God.

James Martin, wrote about Mother Theresa in his book *My Life with the Saints*,

I've never read a saint's life where the saint has such an intense spiritual darkness. No one knew she was that tormented.

Mother Teresa is a very extreme case; most Christians regularly experience the presence of God in a joyful

manner, in nature, with friends, at Eucharist, in prayer. But life in the valley is the norm — the daily life of service, of problems, of sadness for the loss of friends.

Speaking of the loss of friends, this week one of our priest in the Sudanese congregation, abuna Hassan, told me that last Saturday he had a phone call from Sudan. His sister lost her husband and four children when an airplane of the Sudanese air force bombed their house. The Christians in the Sudanese Nuba Mountains are the victims of a vicious effort at ethnic cleansing by Khartoum.

Jesus is our prime example. He had his mountaintops, but He also knew that his obedience to God, was utterly painful and pain could not be avoided. Spiritual mountaintops are donated to us whenever we experience them, to provide strength for daily life and work and to enable us to walk in the way of the cross.

Mistake three

Peter made a third mistake, I believe. He saw Moses, and Elijah, and Jesus, and wanted to keep *all three* together there forever. With that statement he assumed that the three men were actually each other's equals. But Jesus is not just one in a sequence of great men.

Moses and Elijah had come to serve Jesus Christ by confirm to Him how his exodus in Jerusalem would be. The whole of religious history of Israel culminated in Jesus.

Moses and his Law could not bring people to God; the Law is good, but it only teaches what behavior is pleasing to God. And people tend to not follow those precepts well, so prophets are needed to call people back to obedience to God. But prophets cannot bring people to God himself.

Neither law nor prophets are able to solve the problem of man, that is, his existential separation from the Creator. That separation is not only because of the substantial distance between Creator and his creatures, but also because of the moral distance between God and man.

Jesus is not of the sort of religious leader who give us rules for living, or a prophet who calls people back to those rules. Jesus is much greater than Moses or than any prophet.

So by putting Jesus on the level of Moses and Elijah was a grave mistake of Peter, and a mistake that is even today repeated by millions who recognize Jesus as just one of the prophets. 'Rabbi let us make three dwellings for the three of you. This is great!'

GOD HAS THE LAST WORD

What happens next is almost comical — Luke says that while Peter was still speaking, a cloud appeared and a voice from the cloud said: 'This is My Son, whom I have chosen. Listen to him!'

So while Peter spoke God interrupted him: 'Can you please keep your mouth shut, Peter, can you please listen? Jesus is not like Moses or any prophet, He is my Son. He is of a totally different nature. So keep your mouth shut, and listen. Listen to Him!'

When Peter, James and John heard that voice of God from the cloud, they fell facedown on the ground,

even more terrified. And when after a while they slowly, carefully looked up, they no longer saw Moses and Elijah; they saw no one, except Jesus. That is how the Father in heaven wanted it. Jesus as the only focus of our spiritual attention.

The apostle Paul speaks to the church in Corinth about Christ as the image of God. He is the perfect representation of the Creator, and this became briefly visible on that mountain. He is light from light, God from God. He is the image of God, Paul says. In Greek it says: He is the ICON of God.

In the Coptic-Orthodox Churches there are many icons – these are not just pictures, but in Coptic theology, these are windows into the world of God. Touching an icon, our Coptic friends believe, transports people into the spiritual world of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus is that perfect window – touch Him and you meet with God, because He is God's son. That's why St Paul says that when we face Jesus Christ, we face the glory of God.

CONCLUSION

So if we desire to experience more spiritual mountaintops in our life, if we hope to see something of the glory of God even in the midst of our daily life, if that is what we desire, it does not help us at all to focus on experiences, or on accompanying feelings.

The Gospel makes it so clear. If we want to experience the glory of God, we have to face the Lord Jesus Christ. Our focus should be on the Lord himself and on Him alone, and on serving Him, even in the valleys of life.

This Wednesday we celebrate Ash Wednesday; this is the beginning of our 40-day period of focusing on this last time in the life of Jesus, his route to the cross for our sins. Hundreds of Christians worldwide adopt some personal form of fasting to consider in a minute way what sacrifice Christ brought for us.

Some people do not eat meat. Or they do not drink coffee. I know some who minimize their usage of TV and internet. to spend time with God.

By thus staying close to Him, even suffering with him to a certain extent, like the disciples did, we may expect that God will bless us every now and then with mountaintop experiences that help us in our walk through life.

++ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit *Amen*