

MOUNTAINTOP EXPERIENCES

There are far more accidents on mountains on the way down than on the way up. Perhaps after the achievement of reaching the summit has gone, the tiredness creeps in and you've still to get back to the place you left.

I had the wonderful privilege of climbing Kilimanjaro in Africa some years ago. I can tell you the journey down was several *days* shorter than going up but it was still hard. When we looked up at the peak from the camp at the end of that summit day, we could hardly believe we had been up there on the top only hours earlier but I have a certificate and my photos and memories to prove I really was there.

You may not be into climbing big mountains but all of us face times when the mountaintop feels like a long way behind. When we're down to earth with a bump how do we find confidence from the past to keep us going with Jesus Christ in the future, rather than giving in?

In Peter's day, there were all kinds of attractive alternatives to faith in Jesus Christ. *'You don't believe all that do you? You don't believe those prophets? We gave that up long ago'* But yes, Peter did believe and what's more, he says *'we have the words of the prophets made more sure (2 Pet.1:19) ...we didn't follow cleverly invented storieswe were eyewitnesses of his majesty (v.15-16) we saw...we heard....so pay attention to what those prophets said, because their words are like light in dark place even now and what they said came about so there's every reason for thinking that God will keep his promises in the future too. (v.19)*

This, says Peter, is what gives confidence when you come down from your mountaintop experience back to earth with a bump – your eyewitness memories that stay with you forever, the words that gave confidence long ago and still give confidence now, even when you're back in a dark place.

So let's look at the gospel story to see what it was they had witnessed (Matthew 17:1-9)

There was an amazing vision of Moses, Elijah, Jesus. There was a brilliant light and a voice which they recognise as God's voice. And something I've never noticed before: Peter, James and John fall down on their faces when the voice speaks. It's not the brilliant light and this peculiar sense of knowing that Moses and Elijah were there (how did they know? No photos or portraits on the website to look up in those days! Somehow when God wants us to know something, he can get it through.) It's the voice telling them that Jesus is the Son of God, loved by God, that they need to listen to, that floors them. It's as if it only makes sense when they get some kind of explanation. Isn't that like us? We see things that sometimes seem hugely important to others and mean nothing to us until someone interprets them to us. God's words matter. Do we look for those explanations in the Bible, do we listen to what he might be saying to us through others, through our prayers? (Lent might be a good time to think about reading the bible more consistently- I can point you to some good Bible reading notes if you want to try.)

So what the disciples saw were 3 men on a mountaintop. 3 men with mountain experiences.

Time for a rapid review:

Moses –was with people in the wilderness. They have been trouble in all sorts of ways. He is called up to Mt Sinai (Exodus 19), to receive God's commandments. He probably felt relieved at getting away for a bit! The people at the foot of the mountain see darkness cover everything; there's a storm, an earthquake, they're warned not to get too near. Mountains can be dangerous places and when God's involved it can be even more awesome and powerful. Moses hears God's words about moulding a new community by God's ways, he can't see God for the light and when he comes back, he is shining so much that no one can look him in the face. Then it's back to difficulties straight away for him- they'd given up waiting for him and gone back to idol worship.

Elijah – (1 Kings 19) after a massive struggle with the Baals, which he won, he fears for his life, runs away depressed, hides in a cave on Mt Horeb and after an earthquake, a storm, a fire, hears God's voice. He covers his face. He too is sent back to do more work.

They both face conflict, they'd both like to get away, they both cover their faces, aware of the awesome God, they both face the storm and the earthquake, they both hear God speak, they're both sent back to do more work after their encounters with God.

Then there's Jesus. He also faced his conflicts and disappointments at how easily people would fall back into their old ways.

And on the mount of transfiguration just look: there is simply a *bright* cloud – something about God's glory that is not dark and frightening perhaps, but the voice still makes the friends fall flat. The words are the same words as Matthew records at the baptism of Jesus: *this is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him (v.5 also chapter 3:17).*

I spoke with someone a while ago who talked about how he was questioning the value of everything he did. He knew he worked far more than he needed to, to try to impress people, but he couldn't see the point in what he was doing, even so. After a while he told me he never remembered his father saying 'I love you'. His whole life was a kind of effort to impress his father enough to make him say those words, to make him feel worthy, or pleasing. To know he mattered and he was heading the right way.

Wouldn't you need to know you were loved, even if you were Jesus Christ, with all that was in front of you? How many times he might have turned back and wondered, if he couldn't hold onto that knowledge of being God's son, being loved, bringing pleasure, being the one to listen to.

Jesus – on another mount, the mount of crucifixion – there's a black sky, and earthquake at the point of his death. This time God's voice is absent. Has God abandoned him? That's what Jesus says. But it isn't all over because afterwards there's resurrection.

So Peter is the leader of new Christians struggling to believe God is with them in their scattered, difficult places, with all kinds of alternative things to do, people to listen to, religions to try. He wants to give them confidence in the face of difficulties. When they came down from the mountaintop, those disciples faced things they didn't understand, problems they couldn't sort out, conflicts they wanted to run from, and the crucifixion of their friend and saviour and leader.

Jesus knew about coming down to earth. But he held on to what he'd seen. Yes, it would be harder for those who'd not been there but he says *'This is true – he's God's son, listen to him. Look at the signs – God's power to Moses and to Elijah, those encounters with God, those promises; Jesus is better than Moses, better than Elijah-he's God's son, listen to him.*

One writer says this: *desert and mountain places, located on the margins of society, are locations...in luring God's people to a deeper understanding of who they are.....Jesus also pushes people to the edges and crosses boundaries....places on the edges are where his identity as Messiah can be clearly revealed...out in the wilds anything can happen....he frequently declares the power of his kingdom in an alien landscapes [The Solace of Fierce Landscapes'- Belden C. Lane p.45-6]*

So where is your hard journey? (Maybe you're not finding it hard at the moment – great!) If you wonder whether Jesus is really up to the job of helping, then perhaps you can remember those words 'this is my Son....listen to him'. Perhaps you need to hear, like Jesus, the words of God which I'm sure are for all of us who want to do our best for him: *I love you and I'm pleased with you.* The words of the prophets are now more sure, like a light in dark places.

And maybe, though it may be difficult, that being on the edge may bring you to the place that Moses and Elijah and the disciples found when they faced the clouds and heard the voice and fell on their faces, to know that God was with them even when they came down from the mountain to face all that was there at the bottom of it.