

Mountains were very important to Matthew. When Jesus was tempted to worship the devil in exchange for all the kingdoms of the world, it happened on a mountain. We have just looked at the Sermon on the Mount and of course Jesus frequently goes up to the mountain to pray. Today we have this story of the transfiguration, which happened on a mountain.

What is it about something happening on a mountain that adds such special significance? Matthew's roots were in the Jewish tradition and he was writing to Jewish Christians who understood that mountains were holy dwellings of God, places where God's presence was known, and God's laws were given. Mountains became symbols of the way things would be when God's rule finally would extend over the earth. "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths."

Jesus was of course on his way to the cross. On Wednesday we begin in earnest to follow Jesus on the way to the cross. Ash Wednesday signifies the beginning of Lent. 6 weeks until we reach the Cross and the resurrection. The pain, the suffering and then the glory. In Luke's gospel we learn that Jesus went up the mountain to pray. "Am I doing your will in setting my face towards Jerusalem?" Jesus had to make sure beyond all doubt that he was doing what God wished him to do. He had to make certain that it was God's will that he should go to the cross. Jesus would not take one step without consulting God and certainly not the biggest step of his life. Of everything Jesus asked only one question "is it God's will for me?" It is one of the supreme differences between us and Jesus. Jesus always asks, "What does God wish me to do?" We nearly always ask: "What do I wish to do?" The unique characteristic of Jesus was that he was sinless. That means that Jesus had no will but the will of God. In Horatio Bonar's great words of the hymn: "Thy way, not mine, o Lord, however dark it be! Lead me by thine own hand; Choose out the path for me." When Jesus had a problem, he did not seek to solve it only by the power of his own thought, he did not seek out human advice; he took it to the lonely place and to God.

This mountain top experience was incomprehensible for the disciples. Often in life we have

moments that are incomprehensible. The birth of a child, the death of a loved one, for many the death of Caroline Flack was one of those moments. There are mountaintop and valley moments throughout life. We are never ready for them. They arrive unannounced changing us in irreversible ways. But there is one thing they all have in common. They demand that we be silent and listen. These moments have something to say to us, to teach us.

Instead of stopping and listening too often our response is like that of Peter, babbling absurdities because we cannot understand the significant, the meaningful moment. When Peter does finally quit talking nonsense a cloud appears, envelopes them, and the voice of God gives this instruction to Peter, James, and John: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to Him!" Short and to the point.

Earlier Jesus had been with his disciples discussing his identity. "Who do the people say I am?" Elijah, Jeremiah, John the Baptist, came the replies. "But who do you say I am?" Jesus asked. Peter answered, "You are the Christ. The Son of the living God." Also, at this time Herod had thought Jesus was John the Baptist back from the dead coming back to get him. So, questions are surfacing about the identity of Jesus. Even his disciples are having their doubts so Jesus takes his inner circle up a mountain for this private encounter. It is here that they learn in a definitive way that Jesus is none other than the Son of God. No other source would have been as convincing. The disciples were hearing from heaven itself. This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to Him!

There were many whom God loved: Adam he loved but Adam disappointed him. Abraham believed God that he would have son and he offered up his son as a sacrifice but even Abraham tried to force God's hand by laying with his maid servant and having Ishmael. David was a man after God's own heart, but he abused the power he was given. Solomon was wise beyond his years, but he brought idolatry to the land. Isaiah was a great prophet, but he was a man of unclean lips. Throughout the pages of biblical history we find many whom God loved. But there is no finality to any of these. In Christ God's love is complete. There is no malice, no disobedience, no sin in him.

Throughout history it has not been difficult for many non-Christians to believe that Jesus was a son of God. Many religions throughout the ages agreed with this concept. Nor did they take issue with the idea that God was pleased with Jesus' life. God assuredly would love any man who advocated the things and did the things that Jesus did.

But to listen to him is another matter altogether. Most of the pain in this world is due to man's unwillingness to listen, to obey. One of my friends frequently says to her daughter "use your listening ears." In the journey to Jerusalem the disciples are given a genuine moment that reveals with clarity that Christ above all people pleases God and above all others speaks for God. It is this glimpse that will sustain their discipleship into the future. They will continue to cry out in a world not eager to listen. Moses on the mountain alone with God reminds us that we will never fully understand the ways God breaks into our lives, nor can we judge others' mountaintop experiences by our own. The Living God always comes to us in surprising and mysterious ways. For some, God may become more real in a magnificent manifestation on a mountaintop, while for others, it is that still small voice within that brings us into the presence of the Living God.

Each Sunday we rehearse the story of God's saving grace in word, song, and act, and as we are drawn into it more fully we realize that worship done in the presence of the living God allows us to live all of life in God's holy presence. Throughout the next 6 weeks there will be many more opportunities for worship which evoke a response. Moses' experiences on Mount Sinai compel him to head back down the mountain with a stone tablet under each arm. Every genuine encounter with the Living God turns out to be an urgent call to discipleship at the foot of the mountain. There are so many lives to be touched with the love of Christ down in the valley where we live. This is the most important lesson from the mountaintop. Let us go forth to touch others as God has touched us.