**23rd February 2020 : Mountain Top Experiences**

Call to worship

Let us draw near to our awesome God.
We bring our praise and adoration.
We bring ourselves, our memories and our hopes,
in expectation of meeting with our Lord,
whose presence is all around us.
In Jesus, God is with us.

A gathering prayer

Lord, our God, let us see your glory.
Help us to lift our eyes to you,
open our ears to hear your voice.
You gave your message to prophets throughout history;
you give us your Holy Spirit for the present.
And you have given us Jesus, your Son,
to lead us into eternity with you.
Lord, we see, we hear, we believe, and we come to worship.
Amen.

A prayer of approach

‘The Lord is king, let the peoples tremble!’
Lord, we praise your great and awesome name,
you are the holy one.
Today we draw close to you,
to be still and to listen,
to be mesmerised by your dazzling brightness.
Meet us today, Lord, in this place.
Amen.

A prayer of adoration

Most mighty and exalted Lord,
we come today to praise and worship you.
We thank you for your glory,
for your power and your majesty
that transforms our lives into your likeness.
You shone like the noonday sun;
as you revealed your glory on the mountaintop,
reveal yourself and shine on us today.
We worship you most beloved Son of God.
Amen.

A prayer of penitence and an Assurance of forgiveness

 A prayer of penitence

Transforming God,
we come to the foot of your cross
and say sorry when we don’t listen.
We are sorry when we miss you in the midst of our lives,
when we fail to glimpse you,
even when you are shining so bright before us.

We are sorry when we are afraid and don’t trust you,
when we fall asleep, absorbed in our own lives,
when we make our own conclusions and don’t involve you,
when we think we know best.
Help us to always seek refuge in you,
to be transformed by your brightness,
and draw closer to you.
Amen.

Assurance of forgiveness

Awesome God,
we are your beloved and our home is in you.
We are forgiven and transformed into your likeness.
You make us whole.
Amen.

A prayer of praise and thanksgiving

O Morning Star,
we thank you that we can be completely changed by you.
We thank you that you have called us to yourself
to be transformed and made whole.
Thank you that we can draw aside and
spend time in your presence,
worshipping you and praising you for your love.
You transform us day by day.
You draw us closer to you,
so that we can shine bright and be your children of light.
O Morning Star, we praise you!
Amen.

**All Age**

Chocolate, roses or decapitation – what pops into your head when you think of St Valentine’s Day?

We don’t know much about St Valentine; he may have got into trouble secretly marrying persecuted Christians – there’s the legend that in prison he healed his jailor’s daughter’s blindness and sent her a note that simply read, ‘From your Valentine.’ However, one of things we’re most sure of is that he ended up with his head chopped off. Oddly enough, that doesn’t feature heavily in Valentine’s Day cards.

How did you feel about Valentine’s Day this week?

Whether you loved it or hated it, it’s fair to say that real love is more than just chocolates or stuffed teddy bears. Love, romantic or otherwise, is experienced through closeness, spending time with people, getting to know and take care of each other.

In Matthew 17, the disciples witnessed a real moment of closeness with God. They were high up a mountain when suddenly Jesus’ face shone and Moses and Elijah stood before them and God spoke, saying, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!’

This was a wondrous moment and at its centre was the idea of being loved.

Jesus walked closely with his heavenly father, knew that he loved him, and this gave him the strength to go to the cross. The disciples walked closely with Jesus, knew that he loved them, and this gave them the strength to go out into the world declaring that he was the Messiah. In the centuries that followed, this closeness with God has inspired Christians to live out their faith when it was difficult. For St Valentine his love for God was so deep, he was ready to lay down his life for it.

Let’s not settle for love that is just chocolate and flowers. Let’s embrace God’s love for us. A love that gives us courage and transforms us.

**Matthew 17.1-9;**

An Amish boy and his father were visiting a shopping mall. They were amazed by almost everything they saw, but especially by two shiny, silver walls that could move apart and back together again. The boy asked his dad, ‘What is this Father?’

The man (who’d never seen a lift before) responded, ‘Son, I have never seen anything like this in my life. I don’t know what it is.’

While the boy and his father were watching wide-eyed, an old lady hobbled up to the moving walls and pressed a button. The walls opened and the lady passed between them into a small room. The walls closed and the boy and his father watched as small circles with numbers lit up above the walls.

They continued to watch as the numbers lit up in the reverse direction. The walls opened up again and a beautiful young woman stepped out. The father, not taking his eyes off the young woman, said quietly to his son, ‘Go get you mother!’

A story of transformation! And a hoped for transformation!

I’m not sure if you’re familiar with the expression ‘a mountain top experience’? It is often used to describe a moment of transformation; a revelation; a feeling of ecstasy or exhilaration; seeing things in a different light; a religious experience – an intuitive sensing of the close presence of God. The expression ‘a mountain top experience’ comes from the various stories in the Bible where individuals went up mountains and met with God amidst fire and cloud and wind.

Our OT story has Moses being called by God up Mount Sinai to be given the Ten Commandments. Our gospel reading has Jesus taking his inner circle of three disciples up a mountain where he is mysteriously transfigured – his face shines brightly, a strange light surrounds him and a vision of Elijah, representing the prophets, and Moses representing the law, are seen talking with him. This awesome experience is almost a copy of Moses and Elijah’s experiences in meeting God up a mountain. Matthew writes about it to indicate that Jesus is special and the fulfilment of the law and the prophets.

I’m sure we have all had such dramatic episodes that have been a revelation to us. A transfiguration of a situation, a change in understanding of our impression of another person or situation. A transformation; a deeper awareness of something, even of ourselves or of God.

We plainly live in troubled times.[[1]](#endnote-1) Over 40,000 people have died in Turkey and Syria in earthquakes even as living people continue to be found days later. War and earthquake are quite different things, yet they come together in northern Syria. Across the world, conflicts rage not just in Ukraine but in Myanmar, Somalia and many other places. In some western democracies people seem to be turning to simplistic nationalistic rhetoric. Israel has its most right-wing government ever; Italy, Hungary and Poland are led by people with similar underlying ideas..

Against the background of these troubled times, it can be easy to despair. What can we sensibly make of the vision of Jesus in glory revealed in today’s gospel passage? How is the Jesus revealed in glory on the mountain to just three of his disciples relevant in these times?

First, it is worth recalling that this was a vision. Jesus and his followers lived in an occupied country ruled by a military power just as brutal as today’s Russia or Myanmar. The event we call the transfiguration is  a special revelation. In Matthew’s version Jesus tells them ‘do not be afraid’ (v.7). And even this special event is not to be revealed to others until after the crucifixion.

We should not confuse a vision with everyday experience or expect such revelations routinely. We each may have moments in our lives in which we have received special experiences of God. We should treasure them but we should not expect them to be regular occurrences. They are a ‘lamp shining in a dark place’ (2 Peter 1:19). Everyday reality has to be faced.

Second, reflect on the ways in which we use the word ‘glory’ and related words. Our war memorials frequently refer to the glorious dead, though I confess that I find it hard to think of the slaughter of millions in flanders fields in such terms. Human glory, it seems, is often found in conflict.

Third, and even more apparent in Mark’s version of this story than Matthew’s, there is Peter’s inappropriate response. How might we have reacted had we been one of the three disciples whom Jesus took with him up the mountain? And how often do we, like Peter, respond inappropriately when aspects of God are revealed to us?

Finally, we who live in troubled times can take comfort from the Psalms. They encompass a huge range of human emotions. In a single Psalm we can find anger and awe, glory and dread, cursing and praise. While nations conspire and peoples plot (Psalm 2:1), despair is surely not an appropriate Christian response. For, as John Wesley is reported to have said on his death bed, ‘the best of all is that God is with us’.

Let me expand on some of those points.

The transfiguration of Jesus was a dramatic episode that transformed the disciples understanding of their Lord. He was revealed in glory and majesty. They were terrified yet also in awe. They were told not to tell anyone until the Son of Man had been raised from the grave.

Peter said it was good that that they were there. He writes about it in 2 Peter chapter one. Such experiences can be precious. They can give us pattern and pressure.

They can give us pattern by showing us something about a deeper reality. They are called mountain top experiences because to glimpse the pattern we need to gain height, otherwise it is hidden by a multitude of daily details. On the plain and in the valley we are too near to discern properly. Life is on top of us and we have to get on top of life. Climb to gain perspective and vision.

I was once wandering off-track in the middle of a forest. I don’t know if you have ever wandered in a dense forest but after a while you get the impression you are wandering around in circles. You can’t see the wood for the trees as the saying goes. Fortunately I came across a stone tower and I was able to climb to the top of it. It stood above the tree line and could see the edge of the forest in the far distance and the point where I wanted to get to. I was able to take a compass bearing and on descending the tower followed my bearing until I’d reached the edge of the forest. The direction could only been seen from above.

Thus on the Mount of Transfiguration the pattern of the cross and the glory to come began to be revealed. From mountaintop to mountain top, from the Mount of transfiguration to Calvary, the route became clearer.

Sometimes we need the high tower to climb up, or the mountain top experience to help us find our direction in life, to see the pattern of our lives, to revel something more deeply. Times of prayer, closing the door on the distractions of daily life and being with God; going on retreat. All this can give us a fresh perspective, a fresh pattern. The high points can be discerning.

They may also provide a pressure – an energy and motivation. I don’t know if you have been to Chatsworth in the Derbyshire Peak District. A reservoir built in the hills sends a jet of water from the Emperor Fountain at Chatsworth House 275 feet high. Something that happens in the high place can lead to significant results. I can think of many people who had a vision of what they should do and it inspired them to go and do it. Or others who through some deep experience decided to do something different.

Significant results can follow from these high moments. Vision is important but reality also needs to be faced.

Such high points, such mountain top experiences inevitably depart. It is a natural human impulse to try and bottle the experience. Oh if only it could always be like this we may sigh! To try and capture and imprison the passing moment for permanent enjoyment is neither possible nor desirable, as Jesus well knew. The valley and the plain awaited them all. Down in the valley a young boy lay foaming an epileptic fit and Jesus is immediately confronted with human suffering and the need for ministry.

I remember seeing an interview with Kelly Holmes who won double gold medals at the Athens Olympics this year. How can you better that the interviewer asked? That was, and no doubt will be, the high spot of her career. Coming back down to reality has meant having to cope with the media intrusion and family issues particularly her relationship with her estranged father. Hopefully the inspiration of the gold medals can inspire her to go on and be successful in other areas of her life. It may also inspire others.

We have discerned the immediate purpose of the mountain top experience – giving us a fresh perspective and pattern and providing the pressure and passion to live our lives in a new way. But why does it pass and what is its permanent use?

Such high points inevitably depart. Christians are not immune from this human experience. All emphasis on experience has a tendency to stress feeling. Peter might have been warned by the two heroes on the hill. Moses came down from Sinai to find his work undoing and the Israelites making idols of Golden calves. Elijah descended from Carmel’s triumph in 1 Kings 18/19 to moan in depression ‘take my life away Lord’.

John Wesley after his Aldersgate experience where he felt a warming of the heart and an inner assurance of God’s love, a year later exclaimed ‘I’m not a Christian now! The saints know what they call ‘the dark night of the soul’ and ‘the hidings of God’s face’.

Excitement always exacts its toll. Parents know how parties and late nights affect little children, especially the second day afterwards! The hangover effect is known my most adults. After euphoria and the adrenalin rush can come the fall off and the slump.

Like Peter we can attempt to retain the experience and build a permanent structure. The result is that our hallelujahs become stereotyped into a conditional reflex. We expect the permanent spiritual high, or too recapture the initial feeling. Where is the euphoria I once felt? We cry.

All this can be very self-centred. We want to use and squeeze God for our own enjoyment. Worship can become seeking after a ‘good time’. I’ve been to many 'revival’ or charismatic churches. Sometimes the emotion seems false and contrived. I know many people who have left those churches and wonder was the emotion real or imaginary? Was it all mere emotion? Sometimes there follows the cynical dismissal of the experience as an ‘early phase’ of their spiritual journey. It is vital to have a moral and intellectual content to the object of experience, capable of relevance beyond the private, internal feelings involved. Don’t get me wrong, emotions are important, the emotional experience shouldn’t be underestimated – but neither should it be overstated.

Let us grasp the purpose of those mountain top experiences. They are not merely for our enjoyment, but mainly for our encouragement. We can retain the pattern and purpose they may bring us. On the Transfiguration Hill Jesus saw Jerusalem Calvary and Heaven. He would hold onto the vision of divine love he experienced there: the voice from the cloud saying this is my beloved Son, in whom I take great delight’. It would sustain him in the dark days ahead. So our mountain top experiences can sustain us through the hard times. We can use the direction and insight we gain to motivate us and inspire us. And concentrate on fulfilment of those insights. Here on the mount of transfiguration was a preview of the cross, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. These are fixed events apart from our feelings. The transfiguration was a passing hour. So it is in our high moments of inspiration, religious, artistic, personal.

But the Cross and Resurrection remain, not feelings but facts. They are remembered in the tangible sacraments laid on our communion table – linking us to real events, events that changed the world and changed us.

Timothy Keller’s book ‘Making Sense of God’ in preparation for a talk I was giving. The book is about the sceptical age in which we live and how our society places faith in empirical reason, historical progress and heartfelt emotion that’s it is easy to wonder why should anyone believe in Christianity? The book explores what role can faith and religion play in our modern lives?

I had been reading a chapter entitled: *Faith can give you a meaning that suffering can’t take from you.* Keller reflects on the need for meaning in our lives. Most people wonder sometimes what is the point of life and whether their lives have any meaning. The materialistic and atheistic response is that we are all the products of evolutionary chance and when we die we cease to exist. They often then say something like ‘so celebrate life in every moment, admire its wonders and love without reservation. Life is what you make of it. You create your own meaning’.

Keller finds some inconsistencies in this view. If there is no afterlife, if all we are is strictly matter without any soul and we were not created for any special purpose nothing we do here, be it kind or cruel will make any difference in the end. But then they say ‘so’ - indicating a logical sequence – so we should live a life of celebration and love? It doesn’t necessarily follow.

Why shouldn’t we live as selfishly as we can get away with? How do beliefs in human rights and freedom and equality arise or align with the idea that human beings came to be what they are through the survival of the fittest. They don’t really. ‘Man descended from the apes, therefore we should love one another’: the second clause doesn’t follow from the first. If it was natural for the strong to eat the weak in the past, why aren’t people allowed to do it now? I’m not arguing that we should not love one another by the way, but I was getting in touch with my faith which gives me meaning and direction.

Most people don’t think too deeply about the meaning of life. It’s a bit clichéd. Most people just get on with living it: trying to have a good time, experience love, find health and prosperity. The problem is that if you focus your meaning and satisfaction in life on finding love, or family, or having a good career, or being healthy you are likely to end up being disappointed or dissatisfied. You may end up thinking maybe I can do better. Or if you did achieve your dreams you may think is that it? Is that all there is?

Secularism is the only worldview whose members must find their main meaning within this life. All other ways of understanding the world hold that ‘this life is not the whole story’ but with secularism it is. When secular people create their own meanings it must be round something located in their material world. Which can leave you radically vulnerable to the realities of how life goes in the world.

Keller goes on to say that Christians do not side step the question of meaning by saying ‘oh stop thinking through the implications of what you believe about the universe. Just try to enjoy the day’. No, if a Christian is feeling downcast and meaningless, it is because, in a sense, she is not being rational enough. She is not thinking enough about the implications of what she believes about the universe.

Christians believe that there is a God, who made us in love to know our Creator, but that as a human race we turned away and were lost to God. However God has promised to bring us back in relationship. God sent his Son into the world to break the power of sin and death, at infinite cost to himself, by going to the cross. Christian teaching is that Jesus rose from the dead and passed through the heavens and is now ruling history and preparing a future new heaven and new earth, without death and suffering, in which we will be with him forever. And then all the deepest longings of our hearts will find their fulfilment.

It is fair to say that if you are a Christian with those beliefs – about who you are to God and what is in store for you – but you are not experiencing peace and meaning, then it is because you are not thinking enough. Or your thinking is being undermined or corrupted from other sources.

There is a kind of shallow, temporary peace that modern people can get from not thinking too much about their situation, but Christianity can give deep peace and meaning that come from making yourself as aware and as mindful of your beliefs as possible.

I have told you before about having to sit with my dying mother. I realised that we were going along with the secular godless narrative that death was something to be feared, the end of your dreams, just nothingness.

My mother had a strong and unwavering simple faith all her life. Now of all times I realised it must mean something. Now of all times we must celebrate it. If we were feeling downcast and meaningless we were not being rational enough. We were not working out the implications of what she believed and what we believed.

My mother loved playing the piano. She played it for church and fellowship meetings. She sung in the choir. She loved the traditional hymns and she loved the modern songs. Her copy of Mission Praise Music edition has disintegrated because she has thumbed it through so much. I can recall how she would sit at her piano and just play one song or hymn after another going through the book. Having taken my iPad with me I downloaded a copy of Hymns ancient and modern through my kindle app.

We went into hospital and Judith my sister in law and I formed a scratch choir. My brother who doesn’t really do singing just hummed in the corner. We went through hymns ancient and modern all day singing praise to God round the bedside of mum. She stared to join in, humming at first and then as her spirit grew stronger even managed some of the words.

But singing hymns is singing your faith and reminding yourself of what we believe and hold dear. It transformed the atmosphere in that hospital. The nurses kept dropping in to get a bit of the spirit. The chaplain came and we celebrated communion. I read passages from the bible. My mum kept saying ‘isn’t this exciting?’ The next day she was even more alert and told us ‘this is a joyous day’.

It was a blessed time with her because we didn’t succumb to the despair of the world around us. We had a hope to celebrate. Death is defeated Christ has the victory. It transfigures everything. It changes everything.

My mum died a couple of months later on Maundy Thursday of all days. We celebrated her going home, going to be with God, finding that eternal rest and peace, changed from glory into glory. I reminded her of the inscription that she had written in the bible she bought me for my 23rd birthday: ‘One life to live will soon be past, but to live for Christ will always last.’

We live between the mount and the multitude. The mountain tops give the pattern and pressure for what lies below.

Jesus said to his disciples to ‘Get up and don’t be afraid’. Keep going back to what we believe and remind yourself until it sinks in and you live out the implications of those beliefs and don’t let the world squeeze faith out of you. Be transformed by the gospel, renew your minds.

**Prayers of intercession**

In the darkness of the disaster unfolding in Turkey and Syria, we pray for everyone trying to bring some relief to the suffering. Help those who are involved in the ongoing rescue and recovery effort, give them the resilience and patience they need to keep going. We pray for the medical teams arriving to tend the wounded and for the religious leaders who are burying the dead. We particularly pray for the politics and tensions around access to the earthquake sites in Syria. May the decision makers and gatekeepers’ priorities the humanitarian needs above everything else and allow help into the country.

Draw close to everyone caught up in this, God.
Draw close to them, we pray.

Many of us watched the riot scenes outside the hotel housing asylum seekers in Liverpool last week with horror. In the pages of the Bible we see a God who cares for the stranger, is concerned for the outcast and was himself, as a baby with his young mother and father, forced to flee to another country. Help us to show compassion and kindness to people who have left their country and sought refuge elsewhere.

Draw close to people who are fleeing persecution, God.
Draw close to them, we pray.

As the children head back to school for the spring term, we ask that they feel refreshed and ready to learn. For the students heading towards exams give them the energy for this last push. Among all of the upheaval and uncertainty with the strikes and pay disputes, may the teaching staff still be able to concentrate on the day-to-day business of teaching and see the many differences they are making to the lives of our young people.

Draw close to our young people and the staff who teach them, God.
Draw close to them, we pray.

As we listen to the story of the transfiguration and think about the vision Peter, James and John witnessed, we ask that we may see you clearly - perhaps not in a vision on a mountain top but in the everyday stuff of our lives:

* in our daily coming and going,
* in our work and rest,
* in the people we encounter when we shop, at the school gates or at the gym.

Help us to see a renewed vision of you in the world we inhabit, however big or small that is.

Draw close to us in the everyday, God.
Draw close to them, we pray.

*Invite everyone to take a minute to pray for the people they know who are struggling, ill or suffering.*

As we think and pray about our world,
help us to feel close to you.

When we look after the refugees and show kindness to strangers,
help us to feel close to you.

As we get ready to go back to school,
help us to feel close to you.

In our everyday encounters,
help us to feel close to you.
Amen.



A prayer for all ages together

God above in glory (*lift up hands*)
God over all the world (*make globe shape*)
God all around us (*hug self*)
We want to see you (*shade eyes, look around*)
We want to hear you (*cup hand to ear*)
We want to tell others (*hands over mouth like a megaphone*)
so everyone can know how awesome you are. (*wave hands high*)
Amen.



A sending out prayer

Awesome God,
your glory shines all around us.
Help us to use all our senses to know how close you are.
Give us words to tell everyone that you are there for them too.
Amen.

1. *Dudley Coates is a local preacher in the [Yeovil and Blackmore Vale Methodist Circuit](https://www.yeovilblackmorevalemc.org.uk/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) and a former Vice President of the*[*Methodist Conference*](https://www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/the-methodist-conference/)*.* [↑](#endnote-ref-1)