

Thin places

This morning we are all going hill-climbing – at least in our imagination, if not physically. We join Jesus and those three intrepid disciples – Peter, James and John – as we are led by Jesus up a high mountain, where we witness this extraordinary sight: Jesus, transfigured, his face shining like the sun, his clothes dazzling. And suddenly these figure from the past are there - Moses and Elijah. And Peter is overwhelmed and wants to hold onto the moment, to preserve it, and we hear him suggest that we build three dwellings, for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. I'm reminded of a favourite song of mine, a beautiful folk song about Ireland in which the singer, living on the Atlantic coast, sings of 'living on your western shore, saw Summer sunsets, asked for more.' That, after all, is what happens in special moments in special places when life seems to be illumined: you yearn for more, as did Peter.

Then, however, a bright cloud descends and overshadows us and we hear a voice proclaiming Jesus to be the beloved, and the instruction to listen to him and, if we are like the disciples, we fall to the ground, overcome with fear - until you feel the touch of Jesus on your shoulder and he tells us to get up and not to be afraid, and we look around and Moses and Elijah have gone. And if we had read on we would have imagined ourselves leaving the mountain of transfiguration, and down below we are met by a distressing scene: a desperate man whose son is epileptic and who harms himself and Jesus' disciples have been unable to help, and suddenly the mountain top seems distant and far removed. But then, as we watch, we sense perhaps just a trace of the mountain as Jesus reaches out and heals the boy.

So that's the story. And this morning I want to go back up the mountain and from the vantage point of the summit I want to look backwards and forwards in time. Firstly, and prompted especially by the figure of Moses with Jesus, we are taken back to our Old Testament reading from the Book of Exodus, where Moses is on a mountain, Mt Sinai, receiving God's Law. And we are told that a cloud covered the mountain, that the glory of the Lord settled upon it, and that after six days God called out to Moses from the cloud and the appearance of the Lord was like a devouring fire. What we are dealing with here is the presence of God, in cloud and fire: it's a moment in which the veil between heaven and earth is drawn aside and the presence of God, seeps into the world. And if we read on in that story we find that God's presence in cloud and fire comes down off the mountain and accompanies the people of Israel as they journey through the wilderness. And so we meet what is called the Shekinah: the presence of God in a cloud that leads the people of Israel by day and that transforms into a pillar of fire by night – a constant token of God's presence with them. And the Israelites are commanded to build a tabernacle, a kind of tent, which was to be a meeting place for God and Israel and whenever God was in the tabernacle that cloud, the Shekinah, descended and God was in residence. And in later times when Israel was a settled nation they built the temple, and there the Shekinah was believed to dwell. And now, on this mountain top, with Moses and Elijah and Peter and James and John, the Shekinah comes to rest upon Jesus. He embodies the bright holy presence of God.

Now, I want to pause here, and I want to introduce the idea of 'thin places'. Thin places are where heaven and earth seem to come close, where the world seems porous, where the membrane between the divine and the earthly seem like gossamer. So, for example, some of you may know, and have been, to the Scottish island of Iona. It was from Iona that missionaries from Ireland took the gospel to the west of Scotland, and there is an ancient abbey there whose walls have for centuries absorbed the praises and the prayers of worshippers. It's a beautiful place – a little like that spot on the west coast of Ireland where the singer looked out and asked for more. Iona feels sacred, and it has been described as a thin place, where heaven seems just a breath away. Well, Mt Sinai was a thin place, as was the tabernacle in the wilderness when the cloud descended upon it – and as was the temple, and as was that mountain top where Peter, James and John saw Jesus transfigured: thin places, where God is sensed.

Having looked back, however, from that mountain to Israel's past, we are now going to turn through 180 degrees and look forward. In fact we are going to look a very long way forward from that mountain of transfiguration. We are going to look all the way to what lies beyond this present world, what lies beyond tired and weary old creation, to when God will finally renew all things in a new heavens and a new earth. And that new realm, that new redeemed creation, is beyond our wildest imaginings. Elsewhere, however, in the New Testament there is a description of it where we are told simply that God will be 'all in all'. God will be all in all. What does that mean? Well, we can't begin to know, but we could say that the whole creation will then be one thin place. Thin places will no longer be confined to mountains like Sinai or the mount of transfiguration; and they won't be confined to tabernacles and to temples or to holy shores and islands. God will be all in all, as heaven and earth combine and everything is radiant with the presence of God.

Before we get there, however, there is one other place we must visit, another place which we might see if we could look forward from the Mount of Transfiguration. Standing there, if we were able to look ahead into the not-so-distant future, we might see not a mountain but a hill, a hill outside Jerusalem where executions are carried out. And on that hill we would see this same Jesus not being transfigured but being crucified. And what is rather striking is the way in which what is happening there on that hill seems to echo in a perverse and distorted way what is happening here on the mountain. So, for example, this mountain is suffused with light - but there, on that hill, we are told that a terrible darkness came over the land. And here, on the mountain, Jesus' face shines with divine radiance - there it is spat at. And here Jesus' clothes shine dazzling white - there they are stripped off him and soldiers gamble for them. Here Jesus is surrounded by Moses and Elijah - there he is crucified between two criminals, one on either side. Do you see what is happening? What is taking place on that hill is a kind of hideous, distorted parody of what is happening on the mount of transfiguration. If the mountain is a thin place, then that is a thick place, a God-forsaken place.

And speaking of parodies of this story there is one strange fact of history which always chills me. Nowadays it has become common to consider the transfiguration story on this last Sunday before the period of Lent, as we do today. But for centuries in the church the Feast of the Transfiguration has been celebrated on August 6th. And you may know what happened on August 6th 1945. By some strange coincidence that was the day when the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. So there, on that Feast of the Transfiguration, there was a blinding light, and there followed a cloud - but with unimaginable death and destruction: another ghastly parody of transfiguration.

And so we have thin places and one day when God is all in all there will be just one thin place embracing everything. But meanwhile there are thick places, be it Calvary or Hiroshima or a desperate father with a tormented child - any number of other places where death is at work and transfiguration is parodied by disfiguration.

Let me, however, take you to one last place. This morning, as we consider this story, I am reminded of where I was five years ago on this Transfiguration Sunday. I was visiting the Mulanje Mission Hospital in Malawi which this church supports and for whose benefit we are holding a concert in four weeks time. I hope you're coming. Well, the Mulanje Mission Hospital - set, as it happens, in the shadow of the towering Mount Mulanji - is a beacon of light in what is currently the fourth poorest nation on earth. Often against great odds the love and grace of God are poured out in dedicated medical care. One of the hospital's projects is a Palliative Care Team that goes out into the villages and treats the sick and the dying, and one afternoon I was privileged to accompany a palliative care nurse as she visited a home. I went with her into the poorest home I have ever set foot in, a basic brick building without electricity and with just one shared tap outside. And I was taken into this small room with bare, scarred walls. And there on the cracked concrete floor, lying under an old blanket, was a man with soiled bandages wrapped round his leg which skin cancer had eaten away and left raw. And I watched as that nurse slowly and carefully cut off the old bandages, and then so tenderly washed his wounds and sprinkled powder on them and then gently wrapped

new, clean bandages round his leg. And together we prayed and in those moments that room became a thin place, and that has stayed with me.

You see, one day God will be all in all. But meanwhile there are these thin places where God draws near, and we ask for more. But get this. The real thin places are not shores where we look out on summer suns, and they are not holy islands with long Christian history, or indeed mountains. True thin places are to be found down the mountain: where a distressed father rejoices to find his epileptic son healed; or where beneath Mount Mulanje a hospital provides care in the midst of shameful poverty; or where beneath that same mountain a dying man with festering cancer sores is shown dignity and tenderness and his wounds dressed.

In fact thin places can be anywhere, but they depend upon us. Wherever disfiguration is transfigured by practical, costly, love – there the boundary between heaven and earth is thin and porous, and the God who one day will be all in all seeps through – and then the world, and people's faces, shine. Amen.

Holy and gracious God,
 eternal creator of the heavens and the earth,
 we gather here this morning
 and we praise and adore you:
 dweller in pure and dazzling light,
 the one before whom the angels veil their faces.
 We praise you for Jesus,
 in whom you have veiled yourself
 and come amongst us, full of grace and truth.
 And you have created us, your children,
 to reflect your glory,
 that our faces might shine with your divine image,
 and that we might reflect you love
 and you truth and your righteousness into the world.
 O God, forgive us when we fail.
 Forgive us when we are faithless;
 forgive us when our lives are dull
 and conformed to the ways of the world,
 when we dwell in shadowlands rather than
 in the bright splendour of your realm.
 Lord have mercy and forgive us...
 O God, here in this place, this morning,
 we withdraw from the world, taking time out,
 and we climb the mountain
 and we rest in your presence;
 and we listen in the hope
 that we might hear you speak to us.
 Help us as we leave this place,
 descending the mountain,
 to live with eyes cleansed and renewed vision,
 and with hearts burning to live
 as disciples of Jesus, bringing light to the world.
 We pray these things in Jesus' name, saying together...