

Earlier in this series we heard of Moses ascending Mount Sinai to commune with God and subsequently descend with two tablets containing the ten commandments. As Bamber Gascoigne or for those of a younger generation, Jeremy Paxman would say on University Challenge – here's your starter for 10:

In the book of Exodus how many times did Moses ascend Mount Sinai? [**interaction before revealing answer**] The first instance is recorded in Exodus 19: 2-7 and the eighth instance is in the opening verses of chapter 34.

In our Gospel reading Luke similarly places the event known as Christ's Transfiguration on a mountain top. For Luke, as with many people of the time, a mountain becomes a metaphor for the place where we encounter God and even today many people speak of a 'mountain experience' in the same way others talk of a 'Damascene or Road to emmaus experience' - meaning they encountered a significant experience or meeting with God or Jesus. Maybe you remember the selfie of the Rogan and his family surrounded by mist and fog sitting atop a peak in the Lake District when he spoke about encountering God at the start of this year.

But today we hear of Moses encountering God, not on a mountain top, but in a tent....an ordinary tent pitched outside the camp which only becomes extraordinary when a pillar of cloud – Old Testament speak for God – descends and comes to rest at the tent's entrance.

This would be seen as very significant to the people of Israel. We have to remember that initially after Moses first led them into the wilderness on the way to the promised land they would have understood that God was present all the time, as a pillar of cloud during the day and a pillar of fire at night. But all of that had changed whilst Moses was on the mountain top and the people turned to idolatry and built a golden calf, thereby rejecting God. The pillars of cloud and fire had disappeared, yet here, some way outside of where they were camped, God was present.

The other week I was shopping in Windsor and notice a large Royal Standard was flying from the castle's flagstaff. The Royal Standard is only flown when the monarch is actually in residence or attendance. It is a sign telling everyone watching that the Queen is present. That's exactly how I imagine everyone looking at Moses tent in the far distance would have known that God was present. The pillar of cloud – His Royal Standard - was there for all to see.

In some ways, they could take comfort from this. There was something special about Moses and his relationship with God which made the others eventually want to meet with God more intimately, like Moses did. Moses was their leader and those of you who have had the privilege to closely observe Jon and other Godly leaders will know that they truly meet with God in their prayers and worship. This is something we too should not only take comfort from but also be motivated to seek out ways to experience this too.

We are told that God spoke to Moses face to face, just like friends do. And I think this would resonate with the ambitions of Pete Grieg's teaching about prayer which we are studying on Sunday evenings, summarized by the triplet - keep it simple, keep it real, keep it up. That's how I hope I speak to my friends; simply and straightforwardly without side or hidden agenda; openly sharing the reality of my hopes and aspirations, doubts and fears. And talking with them regularly, sometimes daily, not just spasmodically. And that's how I want my prayers to be. I'm not there yet by any means, but that does not minimize the importance of prayer.

And one of the significant details of Luke's version of the transfiguration is that it occurs in the context of prayer. Neither Matthew nor Mark mention that Jesus had gone up on the mountain specifically to pray, and neither mentions that Jesus was praying when the transfiguration occurs. In

Luke's gospel, Jesus is also praying when the Holy Spirit descends on him in the form of a dove.

And if you remember, Jesus spends the whole night praying before going out and starts to appoint his disciples. And of course, Jesus is in prayer when arrested at the garden of Getheseme and on the cross says: "Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" and "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit". Surely, those words are said in prayer.

You will be able to recall many other instances in the bible where God is either present or intervenes during prayer – think maybe the angel and Cornelius or the risen Jesus telling Paul to immediately leave Jerusalem to minister to the gentiles. My favourite one is where there is an earthquake whilst Paul and Silas are praying in prison and the prison doors fly open – and no, I'm not going to repeat my impersonation from a couple of years ago of Elvis Presley singing Jailhouse Rock.

I think the fact that the Transfiguration and the other scenes I've just mentioned are set within a context of prayer should challenge us to seek something higher in prayer. What's more, uniquely, Luke tells us the content of the conversation between Jesus, Moses and Elijah – they speak of Jesus's departure which he is just about to accomplish in Jerusalem.

I spoke earlier about 'mountain top' religious experiences which are usually associated with positive emotions and joyful responses. But here is a mountain top experience with a much more sombre tone as the cross starts to cast its dark shadow over the subsequent events which we, unlike Peter and the others, know of.

With that wonderful gift of hindsight, Peter and the others will come to realize the clear allusion to the saving acts of God in the exodus as Moses led the Israelites to freedom and the hope of the promised land and come to understand the unmistakable reference to Jesus's own exodus from Jerusalem that leads us to our own freedom from death and the hope that is in salvation.

It is in prayer that we can be simple, realistic and persistent with God; letting our innermost hearts go out to him. In response he will in the fullness of his grace and love, come to meet us – just as he did with Moses.