

Sermon

God Almighty!

Sunday 28 February 2021

Lesson

Genesis 17: 1 – 7, 15 – 16

The seventeenth century English theologian, Thomas Burnet, said:

Suppose a Man was carried asleep out of a plain Country among the Alps and left there upon the Top of one of the highest Mountains, when he wak'd and look'd about him, he would think himself in an enchanted Country, or carried into another world; every Thing wou'd appear to him so different to what he had ever seen or imagin'd before.

The writer, Robert Macfarlane, tells of his walks through a high valley in the Canadian Rockies. Nature, he said, is not herself: the blazing hot sun has no purchase on the ice and the unfrozen waterfalls fall *up* the cliff face forced by the storm winds. Like Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy entering through the wardrobe the eternal winter of Narnia, Macfarlane describes going to the mountains as entering 'another sphere'. One nineteenth century writer, John Murray, sleeping outside at 6000ft in the Alps, said he 'enjoyed a night gemmed with stars innumerable, sparkling with a light so vivid as to defy comparison with the scene [at sea level], or amidst the dense and vapoury atmosphere of Britain'. Ecstatically, Murray said, he saw 'a new heaven and a new earth'. By contrast, for the superstitious,

mountains often were believed to be the residence of trolls, imps, dragons, banshees and monsters.

Are you able to recall moments of tranquillity, transporting sensations, as you climbed, walked or sat on an elevated hill or mountainside? Twice in my life I have reached the summit of the Perthshire Munro, Schiehallion. In Gaelic, the name means the ‘Fairy Hill of the Caledonians’. For me, those timeless moments spent at the top are truly memorable. No experience compares to being above the clouds, breathing the seemingly unpolluted air and having eyes being filled with vast, uninterrupted expansive visions. Literature and religions are replete with poetic references to spiritual encounters on mountain tops. For forty days and forty nights, Moses sought the solitude, silence, undisturbed light and deep darkness of the mountain top.

The American naturalist and poet, Henry Thoreau, had been an inspiration to the Revd Dr Martin Luther King in his pursuit of nonviolent resistance to evil deeds. Thoreau spoke of the ‘celestial

influence' of mountains and that there God is to be encountered. He said:

I need solitude. I have come forth to this hill at sunset to see the forms of the mountains in the horizon—to behold and commune with something grander than [humanity]. Their mere distance and unprofanedness is an infinite encouragement. It is with infinite yearning and aspiration that I seek solitude, more and more resolved and strong; but with a certain weakness that I seek society ever.

Looking through the chapters of your life, have there been spiritual moments of transfiguration, of being lifted out of yourself, out of this world? In our Scripture lesson today we read of the LORD appearing to Abram, the aged ninety-nine year old patriarch. Not a Jew, Christian or Muslim, Abram is the father of the three faiths that bear his name; Sarai, his wife is the mother. The LORD appeared to Abram and said, 'I am God Almighty. Live always in my presence'. 'God Almighty': the very phrase is fearsome. It suggests supremacy, omnipotence, invincibility and with that the notion there is nothing that God cannot do: no thing God cannot create, no event God cannot stop, and no choice God cannot undo. The 'Almighty' is immense, enormous and one from who we are to beg mercy. The

Protestant reformer John Calvin spoke of the Almighty chastising us severely.

Behind the phrase ‘God Almighty’, in Hebrew we read, *El Shaddai*. *El Shaddai* means ‘God, the One of the Mountain’. It is the One of the Mountain, the God of the mountain top, that enchanted country, that other sphere with its celestial influence, who called to Abram. It was that same God, the God of Mount Sinai, that spoke to Moses. Surely, it was the same God, the God of the Mountain, of Mount Horeb, who whispered in sheer silence to the prophet Elijah. Numerous times, Jesus left His disciples behind as He went up a mountain by Himself to pray. The Quaker and hymnwriter, John Greenleaf Whittier, wrote of the value of meditative silence:

O Sabbath rest by Galilee!
O calm of hills above,
Where Jesus knelt to share with Thee
The silence of eternity,
Interpreted by love!

The God of the Mountain bid Abram to walk in God’s Presence.

What does it mean to walk in God’s Presence? Earlier in the Book of

Genesis, we are told of Enoch who ‘walked with God’. What a tribute that would be for any of us? Not that we had earned vast sums of money or acquired worldly status or considered ourselves in some sense superior to others but that we had walked with God. Is part of that walking, that inner journey, a practising of peace, of drawing down from the mountain top that ‘other sphere’?

The image or symbol of the mountain certainly hints at transcendence. Are we able to let Eternity’s Silence soak into our souls? Do we see the miracle of creation, of rebirth and resurrection, in the vibrant colours of the crocuses, in the whiteness of the snowdrop, and in the exuberance of the Atlantic winds? If only for a time, are we able to leave behind our anxieties, pettiness, half-truths and power struggles and let the ethereal peace of the mountain calm our souls?

Mindful of the story of Enoch, the eighteenth-century poet, William Cowper, wrote his hymn, *O for a closer walk with God*, when his beloved housekeeper was seriously ill. Cowper said that the words

were ‘whispered’ to his heart in a manner he often experienced. He wrote:

O for a closer walk with God
A calm and heavenly frame
A light to shine upon the road
That binds me to the Lamb!

The God of the Mountain said to Abram, ‘Live in my Presence’.

Amen.