

COVENANT SERVICE SERMON – Revd Andrew Letby

Readings: Exodus 24: 12-end; Matthew 17: 1-9

A book I first read nearly 30 years ago, keeps drawing me back. ‘Above the Treeline’ by Heijje Faber.

It takes the reader on an imaginary hike up a mountain. That hike starts in the hustle and bustle of the contemporary city with all its distractions and competing claims. As the walk begins there are moments of peace as the journey moves through lush meadows but then there is a disturbing period in the wooded foothills. Here it is easy to lose direction, to become confused, frightened, taunted by glimpses of light which offer the false hope of a way out

As the journey goes on the writer describes the joy of breaking free from the darkness of the wood and seeing the brightness of the open sky, glimpsing the world laid out below and the starkly beautiful rockiness of the mountain stretching up beyond. But, here it is not easy going - there is danger, there are choices to be made without the benefit of familiar landmarks. 'Above the treeline we get into a harsher climate: it is cold there; sometimes there is mist and sometimes there are storms. Certainly there is a good deal of sun, and there are wide views...but we are unprotected there: the path is difficult and hard; we have to climb...There are no longer any houses where we can live safely; we have to live in tents.'

Mountain top experiences have a deep significance in the biblical tradition – as our readings this morning have made plain for us. These are massive moments in the story of God’s dealings with his people full of possibility and also of danger.

For Moses the place of the law being given – the Law, more than a code of conduct – was above all a statement of God’s people could live in harmony with the purposes of their Creator.

The imagery of cloud and fire which surrounds all this powerful – wrapped up in mystery, awe and cleansing. This was a moment when Creator and Creation could be set right with one another again.

In the Gospel there is a remake (it’s Oscar season) – slightly different cast but all the same drama.

This is a defining, refining and transforming moment. Once again the relationship between God and people is being recast.

Peter and James quite understandably are excited and in awe of the moment and they want to hold on to it.

Their suggestion of building tents for Jesus, Moses and Elijah is perhaps a sign of wanting to bring at least solidity and safety to the situation. But that is clearly not the right response – this is a moment of revelation which will clarify and inspire – not a permanent place to be.

This morning we share a liturgy which might well be seen as a bit like one of the mountain top moments.

The prayers, the questions, the commitments very much take us above the treeline. They have great beauty and power – but also make us vulnerable. They are about reframing our lives, assessing our priorities and opening ourselves to the possibility that God lays before us.

As Moses was to find, as Jesus’ friends found – that doesn’t come with the promise of an easy ride ahead. Indeed Jesus urges caution – the so called Messianic Secret is one of biblical study’s most hotly debated questions – but at the most basic level when Jesus tells his friends to keep quiet about what has happened, he is urging them not to get over excited, to take stock, to be careful with the powerful truth they now possess.

Through the generations those who have shared in the Covenant service – the so called ‘jewel of Methodism’ have had to avoid the tendency either toward sentimentality or over excitement.

The sharing in this is a sombre moment – it asks for serious self-reflection and questioning. I often note that the service in our worship book is placed immediately before the Ordination services – and that is no coincidence!

One of my reasons for sparing paper to print a copy of the service for everyone is for you to take it away and reflect more. We might just experience the rarefied mountain air in the next few minutes – but we need to work our way back to the nitty gritty too.

The good news in all of this though is expressed in the title of the last chapter of this book – ‘On with the guide’

We are not alone – Jesus did not remain behind but went with his friends. Even Moses – returned eventually to continue the journey with his people.

The Covenant asks us to make a commitment – it also promises support. A Covenant is an agreement – ‘on my part I will – on your part you will’.

On our part, we promise to honour the call of God, on God’s part is the promise that Jesus journeys with us in the power of Spirit.

The last time I spent any significant time in such high territory was on my 40th birthday epic adventure, cycling the Altitplano high in the Andes. Barren, but beautiful landscapes and thin air (we reached nearly 4500m) captivated us and left us struggling for breath. Perhaps the most remarkable event happened each night as we camped by the side of the road and without fail a group of local people would gather near us, unasked, not speaking or really acknowledging us they stood guard over us all night and at dawn disappeared to their homes which we never saw. They could hardly have comprehended what we were about yet somehow picked up our sense of adventure and our vulnerability.

Today we are called to adventure and vulnerability too. But we don’t do so alone.