

HYMNS: **25** **“God is here! As we his people”**
 “Stay, Master, stay upon this heavenly hill”
 569 **“An Upper Room did our Lord prepare”**
 673 **“Will you come and follow me?”**

READINGS: 2 Corinthians 3:12 – 4:2
Luke 9: 28-43

“MOUNTAINTOP TO VALLEY”

Today is the last Sunday before Lent – this coming Wednesday is Ash Wednesday. Lent is that period of preparation for Holy Week, Good Friday and then Easter Sunday – a period of forty days – a reminder of the days of testing that Jesus underwent in the wilderness.

The story which we have heard read this morning from Luke’s Gospel is known as the Transfiguration and it was a hinge moment in the life of Jesus. It was part of his preparation and of God’s affirmation of him for all the sufferings he was to endure. For Jesus this was a mountaintop experience before the valley of suffering and death he was to undergo.

But this passage is a rich source of inspiration and affirmation for us as much as for Jesus and the three disciples who were with him.

Let us look more deeply into this passage. Jesus was trying to prepare his disciples for all that would happen to him as he travelled towards Jerusalem. The beginning of our passage referred to a previous conversation between Jesus and his disciples some eight days earlier. In that conversation Jesus was trying to find out what his disciples thought about him and about who he was. It was in that conversation that Jesus asked his disciples, ‘who do people say that I am?’ They answered, ‘some say John the Baptist, and others say Elijah.’ Jesus then turned and looked his disciples in the eyes and asked, ‘and you, who do you, say that I am?’

Now in this passage we see Jesus taking three of his disciples – Peter, James and John up a mountain to pray. What actually happened next we will never really know because it was beyond normal human experience and beyond human language to describe.

We read, “Jesus’ appearance changed, his face changed and his clothes were shining white. Two other figures appeared with Jesus – identified as Moses and Elijah.

Now interestingly we read that the disciples were very sleepy – they just about managed to stay awake. When they became aware of what was happening to Jesus they were bewildered and confused. Perhaps in their drowsy state they imagined

they were dreaming. Their bewilderment is understandable – wouldn't we be bewildered if we had a similar experience?

And when we are confused and bewildered we say and do odd things – and that is just what the disciples did. Peter said, 'it's great that we are here with you Jesus, let us build three tents – one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.' Just as Peter said these words a cloud came down over the mountaintop and out of that cloud they heard a voice, 'this is my son, my chosen one, listen to him.'

And when the cloud cleared there was Jesus, just as he was and the other figures were nowhere to be seen. Such was the awe and strangeness of the experience that we read that the disciples told no one of what had happened on the mountaintop.

And so the group of four men, Jesus and his three disciples descended from the mountain to the plain and found a crowd of people in a state of some agitation. A man had brought his epileptic son to the other disciples for healing but they had not been able to help.

Jesus was pretty fed up – 'you faithless generation' he called the disciples and those gathered with them there. And Jesus healed the epileptic boy.

This passage shows a critical point in Jesus' ministry but also a critical moment in the shift of understanding of the disciples. Peter, James and John saw Jesus as who he really was – not just a special teacher, not just a healer, leader or prophet but as the Son of God. The shining appearance of Jesus was striking visual evidence of the glory of God reflected in his Son.

But there is a sentence in this account that we can very easily overlook, "when the disciples were fully awake" they saw Jesus' glory. It seems that the disciples were often sleepy and this time they very nearly missed the experience of the full glory of God displayed in Jesus.

This passage has much to say to us as 21st century disciples of Jesus and I think we need to begin here with the sleepiness of the disciples.

We need and seek 'mountaintop' experiences to re-inspire and re-invigorate our faith from time to time. We need such mountaintop top experiences to sustain our energy as Christ's witnesses to the world. We need to see God in all his glory so that we are re-energised to be people who can heal the hurts of others.

Yet, how often are we half asleep? How often do we fail to see the glory of God because we are distracted by our own concerns or just too weary and unobservant? Fortunately, although we might not appreciate it at the time, life is full of things that have the capacity to wake us up and be more alert to our own circumstances and to the world around us.

Perhaps moments of sorrow can be one of the most significant things that can wake us up. Death or illness – our own or that of others, is often a very loud 'wake-up' call, jolting us out of our comfortable rut and posing questions to us about the meaning and purpose of life – and especially our own life.

We do not want sorrowful events to happen to ourselves or others but we know that we have to deal with the ups and downs of life – they are an inevitable part of our life. Yet, if we are alert we can see the glory of God shining through these circumstances – leading us to new insights about ourselves as well as about God.

In the same way falling in love can so easily be a wake-up call, opening our eyes so that we see the world in a new way. Again a sudden change in our life circumstances can also act as a wake-up call – a loss of a job, loss or change of one's home and all manner of things that have an unsettling effect on our routine of life. All of these 'disturbances' can be openings for God's glory to be revealed to us through events or through other people.

The disciples on the mountain top nearly missed seeing the true nature of Jesus, the glory of his Father reflected in him. They nearly missed it because they were not alert. We pray that we may never miss the glimpses of God and his glory in our lives because we are sleepy and inattentive.

When Peter, James and John did stir themselves they realised that they were experiencing something pretty special, so special and so out-of-the-ordinary that they did not know what to do or say. So Peter, ever impetuous came up with an idea. "Let us build three tents – one for you, Jesus, one for Moses and one for Elijah."

Jesus did not respond to the suggestion. Peter's idea dissipated in much the same way as the cloud cleared from the mountain.

What had got into Peter's head for him to make that suggestion? In a very understandable and human way he wanted to perpetuate the experience they had had. He wanted to be able to continue to see the transfigured Christ and the presence of Moses and Elijah. The disciples were quite literally 'on a high' and they did not want to let that go.

That is just what human beings, ourselves included, like to do – to try to find a way to prolong and to sustain moments of spiritual inspiration – glimpses of God's glory. But we really know in our heart of hearts that we cannot live perpetually on a spiritual high. Nor can we box in God's grace and glory in a particular place which we can visit from time to time. "Thoughts, feelings, flashes, glimpses come and go" as the hymn we shall sing shortly has it.

Revelations of God's glory don't come to us only on mountain tops, or in a church or other sacred place. God meets us in his world, takes us by surprise and, if we are alert, can reveal his glory to us at a bus stop as easily as in a cathedral.

Jesus and his disciples went down the mountain and found a difficult situation awaiting them – a crowd of people and a man driven to desperation by the serious fits his son suffered. They needed help – the disciples who had remained behind had not been able to give that help. Jesus came into the situation and brought healing and calm.

Today we are commissioning our Pastoral leaders for another year. These are the people charged with looking after the pastoral needs of the members of this church.

Our passage reminds us that we need to keep awake and alert to signs of God's work in the world – sometimes one of our members will be that sign to us and sometimes our phone call or visit will be that sign to one of our members.

This passage also challenges us about where we see ourselves called to be as Christ's ambassadors. Yes we can and should be caring and friendly here in church but we are also called from this Methodist mountain top into the plains of Islington, Hackney, Westminster, Haringey, Lambeth or beyond.

Our hymn that will follow this sermon speaks of 'ploughs lying waiting in the furrows' – well there are not many furrows waiting to be ploughed around here – the agricultural metaphor does not work so well but there are our jobs and our fellow workers, all the groups and communities with which we link – all places where we are called to live out our Christian vocation in the ordinary things of life.

Yes, we are called as Pastoral leaders to care for our members here but all of us as the congregation here are called to a ministry of care beyond these walls. The statue of John Wesley which we all passed as we walked into church this morning, looks out into the busy City Road, out into the world not back into the Chapel. His parish was the world outside the walls.

May we be blessed with glimpses of God's glory in this place and carry those glimpses with us as we work to serve and seek God's will for us in the world around.
Amen