

After the mountain

Mount Everest, is just shy of 8,849 metres above sea level. Many people have been to the top. But there's a part of the mountain that begins at 8,000 metres and goes to the summit, which is known as the 'death zone', where atmospheric pressure is less than 356 millibars. No human body can acclimatize to that altitude, as the body uses up its store of oxygen faster than it can be replenished. Once mountaineers enter the death zone, their body functions deteriorate, then they'll lose consciousness, and then they will ultimately, die. Once they enter the death zone, they start dying.

Climbing to the top of Mount Everest is one of the greatest achievements of mountaineering. Since Hillary and Norgay in 1953, 7,120 people have ventured into the death zone and have reached the summit of Everest. We celebrate when people reach the summit. I remember celebrating (in a small way) in 1984 when Tim Macartney-Snape and Greg Mortimer were the first Australians to reach the top of Everest.

Getting to the top of mountains, and what happens at the summit – planting a flag, building a cairn, taking a selfie, just pausing to admire the view – is what we celebrate.

But we need to remember what happens next, because the trick is often getting back down. Of those 7,120 people who have reached the summit of Everest, not all of them made it back.

We remember what happens at the top of the mountain, but we often forget what happens after.

In our gospel reading today, we heard Luke's account of the transfiguration – when Jesus took Peter, James and John up the mountain, and they saw Jesus transfigured – the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. Not only that, Moses and Elijah appeared there, and were talking with Jesus. And then, the voice of God spoke from heaven "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him."

This is what we particularly remember today, on Transfiguration Sunday.

In today's reading, Luke tells us that after the transfiguration, after the mountain "The disciples kept this [what they had seen and heard] to themselves and did not tell anyone at that time what they had seen."

We might wonder why they refrained from telling anyone else about what had happened.

I think there may have been a practical dimension to the disciple's secrecy. We know that the crowds were already becoming a problem for Jesus in his ministry, so eyewitness accounts of the transfiguration, might have caused the crowds to grow even bigger, and been even more problematic to deal with.

We do know, though, that the disciples' silence was only temporary, because we have the four gospel accounts now, including from John who was one of the three that was with Jesus – and we have the apostle Peter's own account in his second letter as well (2 Peter 1:16-21).

The silence ended because, when Jesus' mission was completed in his death and resurrection, when the work of salvation was accomplished, Jesus gave them an instruction: "... you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

It became the time for them, and all believers, to share the good news... and we can think about how that message has been shared over and over again, and is the reason we are here today.

But that's to come later... immediately after the mountain, Luke's narrative moves on, and he tells us "The next, day, when they came down from the mountain, a large crowd met him." (9:38)

They may not have accepted him yet as the Messiah, the chosen one, the Son of God, but they knew Jesus was a healer, a wise teacher, a man who could work miracles – and just looking through Luke's gospel so far, we can see that he has driven out evil spirits, healed people, and even raised the dead.

So, if you wanted healing for yourself or your family, you sought Jesus out. If you wanted to hear a message of hope, you sought Jesus out. If you were in a dark place, you sought Jesus out. The crowds flocked to hear him. To see him. To have his hands laid on them or even just to touch the hem of his cloak.

And so, having been on the mountain, having been transfigured and having talked with Moses and Elijah, Jesus came down from the mountain – back to earth – and immediately he was back in amongst the realities of first century life.

We heard that "A man in the crowd called out, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son, few or he is my only child." (9:38).

The man explains to Jesus: “A spirit seizes him and he suddenly screams; it throws him into convulsions so that he foams at the mouth. It scarcely ever leaves him and is destroying him.” (9:39).

People will often try to explain in modern medical terms what “A spirit seizes him... [and] throws him into convulsions” might be. It might be schizophrenia, or it might be epilepsy, or it might be something else... modern medicine isn't too keen on the idea of possession by spirits.

In the context of the narrative, I don't think it matters whether the cause of the boy's convulsions was mental or physical or even supernatural, because to those who were there it was a spirit that seized the boy, that made the boy scream and convulse and foam at the mouth. They could see this boy being slowly destroyed by whatever this was.

And so this boy's father turned to Jesus – “I beg you to look at my son”.

He'd tried the disciples, but they hadn't been able to help. Now, we're used to Jesus being the one who does the healing, but Jesus did give that power to his disciples too – just back at the beginning of this chapter “When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick.” (9:1-2)

The man explains “I begged your disciples to drive it out, but they could not.” This spirit, this sickness, was too much for them.

Jesus response is a difficult one: “You unbelieving and perverse generation,” Jesus replied, “how long shall I stay with you and put up with you? Bring your son here.” (9:41)

There's some dispute about who the first part of Jesus' response is directed at: Is it the father of the boy? Is it the crowd? Or is it the disciples? The weight of opinion is that it's not the father that's being told he's unbelieving and perverse, and it's probably not the crowd, but it probably is the disciples who Jesus is describing as unbelieving and perverse.

Jesus, at the beginning of the chapter, had given the disciples power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, but now, they were unable to do so because they were unbelieving and perverse.

Jesus gets angry with them. And I like that Luke records it, because Christians – and people generally, for that matter – often have a mental picture of Jesus as a placid, serene figure that passes through history doing nice things, and being nice to people,

maybe sometimes criticising the religious hierarchy of the time, but not really showing much displeasure with others.

But here, Jesus gets angry with his disciples, “You unbelieving and perverse generation, how long shall I stay with you and put up with you?”

Perhaps it’s less anger, and more exasperation, “You unbelieving and perverse generation, how long shall I stay with you and put up with you?”.

Either way, though, this is troubling for us: As Christians, we know that it’s not the amount or strength of faith that’s important – after all, Jesus said “If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it will obey you.” (Luke 17:6). We know that it’s not the amount or strength of faith that’s important, it’s who we have our faith in that matters.

If our faith is in Jesus, we’re okay. Right?

And yet Jesus said (or shouted or sighed) “You unbelieving and perverse generation, how long shall I stay with you and put up with you?”

The disciples were a special case – at least on this occasion – because Jesus had given them particular authority and power, and because of their lack of faith, or their immaturity, or their lack of confidence in the authority and power entrusted to them, or perhaps their fear of exercising that power and authority, they’d failed.

They’d acknowledged Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God. But despite that, they hadn’t trusted him.

And there’s something in that for us today: We acknowledge Jesus as our saviour, Jesus as our hope, but do we trust him?

Jesus asks, “You unbelieving and perverse generation, how long shall I stay with you and put up with you?”

The good news is that that the answer to that question is ‘as long as we need’. The disciples lacked the faith and belief and trust, but Jesus stuck with them regardless. Peter denied him three times, but Jesus stuck with him, regardless. Thomas and the others doubted the fact of his resurrection, but Jesus stuck with them regardless.

Our faith will falter, sometimes. We may find things overwhelming. We may fail to use the gifts that Jesus has given us. But Jesus will stick with us, for as long as we need, regardless. And our lack of faith or strength or skill or whatever isn’t going to stop Jesus.

Sure enough, the disciples had failed, but Jesus said to the father “Bring your son here.”

And we read that “even while the boy was coming, the demon threw him to the ground in a convulsion. But Jesus rebuked the impure spirit, healed the boy and gave him back to his father”. (9:42)

It’s interesting that we don’t have an account of how Jesus rebuked the impure spirit, while we do have the detail of how he rebuked the disciples. I think that’s because we’re like the disciples, not like the impure spirit. The disciples had a problem, but the impure spirit was the problem.

And we all have problems. Some big, some small. Some public, some private. We all have problems, but we are not the problem. God doesn’t want to get rid of us, God loves us, and cares for us, and God wants us to be reconciled with him.

Jesus healed the boy – he removed the problem and gave the boy back to his father. He restored the boy to his father. The boy was no longer under the control of the impure spirit, but back with his father.

And then today’s reading ends with Luke telling us “And they were all amazed at the greatness of God.” (9:43)

There is no question among the crowd about the source of Jesus’ power. They may not have yet known he was the Christ, the promised Messiah, but they knew his power could only have come from God.

The important thing wasn’t that Jesus was better at casting out spirits than his disciples, and it wasn’t even that he had authority over the spirit. The important thing, for that crowd, is that Jesus came from God. “And they were all amazed at the greatness of God.”

It brings us back to what we learn of Jesus from the story of the Transfiguration: A voice came from the cloud, saying, “This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him”.

There’s the bright lights and the glorious splendour and Moses and Elijah, and that’s all significant, but the most important part is that voice, and what it says. This is the relationship of God the Father to God the Son.

We are all members, at times at least, of an unbelieving and perverse generation. But we can take heart that Jesus will stick with us as long as we need. And he will empower us, and strengthen us, and equip us, to part of his church and part of his kingdom.

We are privileged to live when we do. The disciples didn't know the full story yet, but we know the full story of Jesus, and to have God's glory revealed in the scriptures, in creation and in all our lives. So let us trust him, let us share in his glory, and let us also share it with others.

Amen.