

## Changed on the mountaintop

I was talking to Barry Lloyd during the week, and he was telling me about his time in Africa, which was amazing stuff, but the achievement that really struck me, in the context of this week's bible readings was that he climbed Mount Kilimanjaro. It's the tallest mountain in Africa, and the tallest free-standing mountain in the world – from base to summit it's about 4,900m. I am in awe of that effort.

By contrast, my mountaineering claim to fame is that I have climbed Frenchman's Cap in Tasmania. Frenchman's is 1445m tall, and the place we set out from, a campsite beside the Franklin River was 200m. So, it was more than 1200 metres up – only a quarter of Barry's climb of Kilimanjaro. Even so, every step was upward. There was no relief on the climb. It wasn't technically demanding – and we weren't roped together or anything, but there were times when we had to use our hands as well as our feet.

We left the river in the morning, climbed to a saddle about 200m below the summit, left the packs there and climbed to the summit. Looked at the view. Took a few photos, rested against the trig marker. Then walked back down to our packs, picked them up, and then walked down to the hut near Lake Tahune. It was absolutely exhausting. I slept very, very well.

And the next morning we got up, and walked back to the saddle, and then walked downhill all the way to the river.

It was quite an experience.

There is something about mountains. About going up to the high places. To see the world from a different perspective. But invariably, we come back down.

Throughout history, people have gone up mountains for wisdom, for enlightenment, and to encounter God.

Abraham was called by God to go to a mountaintop in to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice, and on that mountaintop, God provided a ram as a sacrifice in Isaac's place.

Moses went up Mt Sinai to encounter God and receive the ten commandments. (Ex 20)

And later Moses went back up the mountain, to talk with God, and when he came down, his face glowed because he had been talking to God.

And of course, Elijah ran away and hid in a cave on a mountain (1 Kings 19), where God spoke to him in a still small voice. And Elijah was reassured, and reinvigorated to go back to his mission.

The common thread, I think, is that people go up mountains, and have an encounter with God, and they're changed by it...

Martin Luther King Junior spoke about his own metaphorical mountaintop experience - "I just want to do God's will. And he's allowed me to go to the mountain. And I've looked

over, and I've seen the promised land! I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the promised land."

Not only was he changed, but society was changed. And society is still coming to grips with that change.

In today's bible readings we have two descriptions of a mountaintop encounter with God.

I'm sure most of us are familiar with the story of the transfiguration: Jesus. Moses. Elijah. Dazzling white. Voice from heaven.

Amazing, amazing stuff.

The modern church often doesn't do well with the supernatural. The supernatural aspects of our faith can be a bit embarrassing in the modern world.

Jesus' wise teaching is generally quite acceptable in the wider world. His teaching particularly from the Sermon on the Mount, for instance, is broadly acceptable to society. But when we get to the supernatural stuff – the miracles, the healings, and of course the casting out of demons – well that's a much harder sell.

And then we get to the transfiguration. Jesus. Moses. Elijah. Dazzling white. Voice from heaven.

If people have trouble with the odd miracle, then the transfiguration is going to be at another level altogether.

And yet here it is. We have accounts of it in the gospels of Matthew and Luke as well as here in Mark, and as we've heard in our epistle reading today, it's also confirmed by Peter. The apostle Peter, who we need to remember was there – he was an eyewitness.

But if we think the Transfiguration is difficult to come to grips with today, imagine what it must have been like for Peter, James, and John!

The Greek word translated as "transfiguration" is the word "metamor-phothe," from which we get "metamorphosis", and means a complete change of appearance and form.

And really, the transfiguration was Jesus' second metamorphosis... the first one was him leaving the glories of heaven to come to earth in human form - to live with us - to share human life – with all its pain and suffering, and all its distractions and temptations. And we see that referred to in the opening of John's gospel – where we read that the Word become flesh.

Of course, later on another metamorphosis would take place - Jesus would rise from the dead, the firstborn from the dead as Paul writes to the Colossians (Col 1:18).

But that's getting ahead of things: Today's gospel reading takes place as Jesus is nearing the end of his earthly ministry. We're in Chapter 9. And by Chapter 11, Jesus is making his triumphal entry to Jerusalem. It's getting very, very exciting for Jesus' followers.

Our reading today opens by telling us that “After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain”.

After six days – six days after something. We have to go back to the chapter before to find out what that was – and it’s that exchange that Lawrence shared with us two weeks ago where Jesus asked his disciples who people said that he was.

You can look back at Chapter 8 verse 28 – the disciples tell him “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.”. All really important people in the life and the history of the nation of Israel. So, it seems that everyone realised Jesus was important... but not every realised how important.

Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do you say I am?”

And Peter answered. It’s likely he blurted it out “You are the Messiah”.

Jesus confirmed it – but oddly told the disciples not to tell anyone. And what’s more, he went on to tell the disciples that he must die...

Scary stuff.

And so, six days later, Jesus takes his three closest disciples – his inner circle high up a mountain. Later on, shortly before his death, he took those three right into the Garden of Gethsemane where they were present at his arrest.

Years later, Peter wrote of what happened on that mountain: “He received honour and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.””

And that’s the glory that we read of in John’s gospel too – and remember that John was a witness to the transfiguration as well: John 1:14, John says, " The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."

Both Peter and John were there. They saw Jesus transfigured: His appearance changing dramatically, his clothes became dazzling white. And just as that happened, Moses and Elijah appeared and were talking with Jesus.

Moses and Elijah – the great heroes of the nation of Israel; Moses representing the law – the first five books of the Old Testament, and of course Elijah was a prophet.

There’s this amazing thing happening in front of their eyes, and what does Peter say? Let me make you three shelters. Or three dwellings or three tents depending on your translation.

As we encounter Peter in the gospels, he’s not known as one who’s prone to stop and think about things. Remember – he’s the one who blurted out “You are the Messiah”, he’s the one who jumped over the side of a boat to walk across the water to Jesus, he’s the one who insisted that he would never deny Jesus.

But three shelters? Why?

Well, shelter is a basic need. If you're on a mountain, you'll probably need shelter. It's our instinct to offer people the basic needs of life. "Come in". "Would you like a glass of water?" My guess is if most of us were witnesses to the transfiguration we'd say something like "Jesus, can we get you and Moses and Elijah a cup of tea or coffee?"

But having three shelters made wasn't what God wanted, because while Peter was still making his offer "Then a cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!" (9:7). You might remember from Mark's account of Jesus baptism in chapter 1, that the voice from heaven spoke then as well "And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." But this time the voice adds "Listen to him!"

Jesus is not just important in who he is, but what he has to say is important too, so "Listen to him!"

And the voice from heaven confirmed Peter's statement of Jesus' identity from six days earlier: that Jesus was the Messiah.

It may well be that the voice was reassuring the disciples that Jesus was the Messiah, and that Jesus hadn't gone mad. After all, Jesus had not only confirmed Peter's identification of him as the but Jesus had also begun to tell the disciples that he would have to suffer and die.

How do you think the other disciples would have reacted? Did they all join in, "He's right, you are the messiah. Peter is absolutely right!" Or perhaps they looked at one another and maybe even rolled their eyes. Or shook their heads

The disciples may well have thought that Jesus was going mad, but now in this mountaintop encounter it is confirmed to them that Jesus is the son of God. And that what he says is right: Listen to him! As the voice said.

Suddenly, on this mountain top, if they weren't already, John and James were convinced that what Peter had said is true. Jesus was the messiah.

They already knew Jesus as a wise teacher. They knew that there was something special about him.

There are lots of people today who know those things. But don't recognise Jesus as the Son of God – as the saviour of the world.

Just like there are lots of people today who think at there is a God, but who don't recognise that God loves and cares for them – loves and cares for them so much that, in Jesus, God became one of us.

We read in John's gospel that Philip, another one of disciples, said to Jesus, "Lord, show us the Father, and that will be enough for us."

"Jesus answered: `Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" [John 14:8-9]. When we get to know Jesus, we get to know God.

Today, we still can get to know God by knowing Jesus. We need to listen to God's word. When we don't, there are frantic attempts, I think, to reach out and find something to believe in. As I'm sure you'll have experienced, people believe in all sorts of things, they put their trust in money, in power, in families and even in luck.

We can look around our churches and cathedrals, all built as monuments to the glory of God. Some people even put their faith in those monuments. And we do see soaring spaces and all that magnificent architecture, and beautiful stained-glass windows, but none of them even come close to showing the glory of God that was revealed to those three disciples in the transfiguration.

But we can glimpse that glory as we read the scriptures.

In John 17, Jesus prayed just before Judas betrayed Him in the Garden of Gethsemane. He prayed for himself, and for his disciples, and for all who would believe in him because of the witness of the disciples.

In that prayer Jesus mentions the glory of God over and over again. His prayer goes like this, "Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you...I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave Me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began" [John 17:1,4,5].

Then, a little bit later on, Jesus prays for us, "I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one."

It is a shared glory. That glory is something that we share because when we are Christians, God works a change in our lives. Then we can share in the glory that Peter and John and James saw on that mountain.

The glory of God was revealed in dazzling white and in the cloud, but mostly the glory of God is revealed in Jesus.

We can experience that glory today. Not being engulfed in clouds on mountaintops, but in coming to know Jesus. Jesus, who came from glory to become one of us. To live and human life, and to die a human death. A servant king.

It's an image we're quite used to. We sing about it "This is our God, the servant king". But that imagery can sometimes take away from glory of God.

But the transfiguration, for the three disciples who were privileged to witness it, was terrifying. God is loving and merciful, but God is also powerful and mighty.

Then suddenly, when they looked around, we read that Peter, James and John no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.

The transfiguration was over. Moses and Elijah were gone. The cloud was gone. The brightness was gone. The voice from heaven was silent.

But there was Jesus.

And then the four of them came down the mountain. The disciples were probably still shaking from the experience. And probably still shaking their heads at the experience, too. But they'd experienced the glory of God. All that Jesus had told them up until then had taken on a whole new light. Their thoughts about who Jesus was were now confirmed in what they saw on that mountaintop.

The four men who came down the mountain would have looked much the same as the four men who went up the mountain. Jesus had been transfigured, but Peter, John and James had also been changed because they'd seen the glory of God in Jesus.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead (9:9).

We're used to, in churches, being told to tell people about Jesus aren't we? To stick with the mountaineering theme we have today "Go tell it on the mountain!". But here we have the order not to tell anyone what they had seen ... and similarly six day's earlier, Jesus had told the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah."

But these 'secrets' were only to be kept for a short time... and they were probably needed for the disciples to understand Jesus' mission, and to ensure that his mission could go ahead.

Jesus tells them they can tell others after "the Son of Man had risen from the dead". Because then, his mission would be complete, the work of salvation would be accomplished. That would be the time for them, and all believers, to go 'tell it on the mountain.'

We are privileged to live when we do. To know the full story of Jesus and to have God's glory revealed in the scriptures, in creation and in all our lives. And we're privileged to be able to share in that glory, and to share it with others, in so many different ways.

To the glory of God.

Amen.