

Transfiguration Looking over valleys

Footscray BC 11/2/2024 Transfiguration

Text: Mark 9:2-10 plus reference to previous and next texts

Sometimes I want to come up with a short sentence, a few really inspiring words.



Like Rogers and Hammerstein who wrote *The Sound of Music*, that great musical, which has very little in common with the true story of the Von Trapp family of Austria just prior to WW2. The movie which is probably more widely known than the stage production, came out in 1965. What did they write that was inspiring? *Climb every mountain, 'til you find your dream.*



Or, when he was asked by a reporter why he wanted to climb Mt Everest, British mountaineer George Mallory replied: *because it is there.* Here he is, on the right with his climbing companion Andrew Irvine, in 1924 prior to attempting the summit (June 8). Whether they actually reached their goal, is unknown, although they were seen by telescope moving strongly towards their goal, a few hundred metres from the top before cloud enveloped them. Mallory's body was found in 1999, but his camera was not with him. Irvine was never found. Why do you want to climb Everest? Not because it is the highest, but *because it is there.*



Or, Martin Luther King who would preach (on 3rd April 1968) the day before his assassination: *I have been to the mountain top.*

I am utterly envious of those who can come up with such inspiring, memorable lines.

These are words that stay with us once we have heard them, and even more so, once we know the circumstances around when and where they were said.

Today, we have heard an account of being on another mountain, and an event that has come to be known as the Transfiguration. It is important that we know the circumstances around this event, so that we can make a reasonable attempt to know what it might mean for us, 2,000 or so years later.

There are many ways we can approach this episode in the life of Jesus and his disciples. Today, we will consider the benefits of bringing two approaches together and how they give us a broad perspective.

For some people and churches, it is important to be reminded of how brilliant it is to be with Jesus in life and in faith. So the re-telling of the Transfiguration in those places will focus on the highs of being up on the mountain with Jesus.

I think we need to be very careful with this approach: that we can be on a high with Jesus all the time. You are up here on the mountain top, experiencing things of great excitement, so be happy with Jesus, and always be happy with him.

I have heard this said by someone who should know better. In the congregation that day was a couple who had just had a miscarriage. Also, another person who had not long been diagnosed with an advanced cancer.

Indeed, someone here may be in the deepest of lows in your life. If that is you, my love and prayer, for the deepest comfort of God for you, and for the most profound and holy sharing of pain and grief. But to be told to be happy is an insult to your pain. Be happy, be on a high with Jesus. I don't think so. Well, not all the time, anyway.

In some places, other people will be reminded that each gospel writer goes on to relate going back down the mountain for Jesus to be met by a boy and his family who are in dire need of help. The disciples who have remained down the mountain are unable to do anything about the boy's woes.

In these places, the importance of caring for the lost and cast aside, is emphasised, for this is where we will be with Jesus, this is where we have every opportunity to serve and discover God.

We need to be careful with this second approach, too; it is insufficient when taken in isolation from the Transfiguration. There is too much temptation to make people feel inadequate by pointing out that they are not constantly doing good things, that they are “too heavenly minded to be any earthly good.”

Maybe they are working so hard at many good earthly things that they are unaware of the divine.

If we can come to a balanced view of these two approaches, we can discover that the mountaintop is essential, and the valleys are essential too.

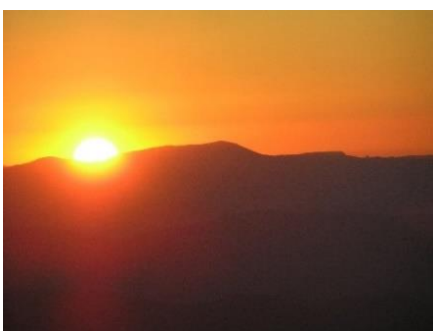
Let us go up a mountain and see what we can see.



I am well acquainted with one particular mountain top, and the views it has to offer. It has become very popular to go up to the summit of Mount Buller, near where I live, on New Year’s Eve with a few nibbles and some wine, and watch the sun set for the final time for the year. There is considerable camaraderie amongst the folk who go there. A 3 hour drive from here, a 10 minute drive from the village of Mt Buller, then a 10 - 20 minute walk up a rocky ridge to the very top, where you might find the fire lookout warden has opened the lookout window and is happy to chat, while, I hasten to add, keeping a lookout for smoke.

It is great up there; the view is magnificent, the colours are spectacular and many other peaks can be seen. Maybe next year we should go to another mountain top.

Or, maybe, we could pitch a few tents up there, staying on top of Buller watching sunsets for a whole year. And sunrises as well, should we look in the other direction.



That is what a few disciples want to do. They have gone with Jesus up the mountain, maybe to contemplate recent events. Perhaps as they clambered up, they thought about other mountains and what their forbears had done up there.

And so, when they see whom they believe to be Moses and Elijah with Jesus, of course they want to stay! These are the luminaries of their faith, and Jesus has a personal “in” to their company. Let’s make some shelter; let’s pitch a tent. Let’s stay on this high for a very long time, if not for ever.

If we stay on the top of Mt Buller, we will get very cold, because in a few months winter and snow will arrive.

If Mallory and Irvine stay too long on that last ridge to the Everest summit, they will soon run out of oxygen and die. Or they will slip and fall and die. Or they will find themselves in the middle of a cloud and be lost from the sight of those below forever.

If the disciples stay on the top of their mountain with Jesus, they will find themselves disappointed. Moses and Elijah will go away; only Jesus will remain and even he will not be willing to stay there.

This is not a place where there is a spiritual high for ever. The extremes of blinding light and of dark cloud disappear and the mountain is dirt underfoot. The next dark cloud to come along will just be carrying rain. It is all so very normal.

On the way down, Jesus says to Peter, James and John to keep quiet, to live with the memory of this experience until they understand what it has all been about. Don't try to understand it yet, just live with the experience for a time.

Can I suggest that you go with Jesus and the disciples on this mountain hike. Set some time aside to reflect on the story.

Pay close attention to what happens up there. Allow yourself

to be overcome by the mystery of what you have not understood;

to be terrified by the realisation that you have looked God in the face;

to be awestruck by the voice from the cloud;

to know that you are in a holy, sacred place,

Yes, to be on a high for a time.

And also to know that you must go back down.

I suggested a few moments ago that I should consider NYE from the top of some other mountain. There are plenty of mountain peaks to be seen from the top of Mount Buller. Which one shall I choose? How will I get there? I look over all those valleys, rivers and plains and try to decide.



Surely, I could just take a running jump and get there, or wave down a passing helicopter, or ask my friend if I could have a go with her hang glider. I would not need to take the long way around, laboriously down one winding valley road, and equally laboriously up the next valley on another winding road.

As we look over the mountains from the summit, we surely know that much is hidden in those valleys. Beauty, yes, but hardship and challenges, too. Our families, our neighbours, our friends. Strangers and enemies. Outcasts and untouchables. All are in need, all are loved by God. If we want to see the view from the next mountain top, we must meet these people first.

When we go back down the mountain with Jesus, Peter, James and John, we first find the boy who is in deep need. Jesus assists the boy but he also laments: *How long must I be with you?* It is a heart breaking question; the needs are constant.

Because we have seen Jesus transfigured, we can hope for the transfiguration of all the tragedy and messiness of the whole world. Healing and redemption are in the hands of God, constantly being given away. No wonder God's heart is broken.

What else does *climb every mountain* ask us to do? It does not allow us to remain up high, even if that is the final scene of the movie. The song also calls us to *search high and low*.

What else of Irvine and Mallory? Irvine was only 22 when he died on Everest. He had put everything he could into his short life. Mallory was 37, and left his wife and 3 children. Going up a mountain was one thing; coming down it brought many losses.

What else did Martin Luther King say in that sermon? He didn't go straight from

I have been to the mountain top

to *I have seen the promised land.*

He knew there were valleys to go into and through first.

I can't give King's sermon the inspiring cadence that he gives. Have a search for it on the internet, so that you can hear his voice, if you have not heard it already.

... Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live – a long life; longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up 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...

King was assassinated the next day. He was 39 years old.

We have been to mountain tops. We have seen other peaks, valleys and rivers. We have seen bright shining light and dark cloud. If we go up a mountain, we must come down again; if we go through the valleys we are assured of the healing companionship of God and can anticipate the transfiguration of all creation. May we have open eyes and open ears to see and to hear.