

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

Well, mountain-top experiences and transfiguration (or *metamorphosis* in Greek) for both Moses and Jesus. But I want to start with a personal story that might set this in a slightly different context.

The week before last I spent some time in the Lake District on a kind of retreat which also involved some walking. I stayed at Rydal Hall near Ambleside, a splendid Christian retreat centre. On the last day, I wondered if I might be able to climb Helvellyn, and so I drove to the car park on its west side. From there a well-marked and good path takes you to the top about 2 miles away, though involving a 735 metre (over 2,000 feet) climb.

But when I got to the car park, the top of Helvellyn was nowhere to be seen – shrouded in cloud and with snow even on the lower slopes that I could see. And it was raining and a strong wind was blowing. Nonetheless, there was a small group in the car park who looked like they were setting off anyway. But I decided that the risks were too great – on my own, at my age, with a newish hip ... My Mum, when I told her, said it sounded like I'd finally grown up and was being sensible at last!

So, instead I walked round Thirlmere, a pretty boring, fairly flat walk, a bit of a trudge around a stretch of water that isn't even a Lake but a reservoir. But there were views of the hills, if not the mountains, that surround it, I was able to keep going at a steady pace, I found a sheltered spot by the water to have lunch when it wasn't raining, and there was at least a degree of satisfaction when I had done my 10 miles. But no mountain top!

Now I tell you all that, not so much for your sympathy, but because it struck me that this is how it is for most people most of the time. The only people who had mountain-top experiences in our readings were Moses, Joshua his assistant, Peter, James and John, and of course Jesus Himself. The rest – all the Israelites, the remaining disciples and presumably the others in Jesus's party – were left to get on with life at ground level. And, if we're honest, life at ground level can be a bit of a trudge, even though it probably, and it is certainly to be hoped, also involves some high spots including satisfaction at things achieved.

So, let's first concentrate not on the mountain-top experiences in our readings, but on those left behind at ground level. When the Israelites realised that Moses and Joshua weren't hurrying back (they spent 40 days and nights, i.e. a long time on the mountain) they did something awful. They persuaded Aaron, who'd been left in charge, to make a golden calf, and then they worshipped the image and held a great celebration, a revel. So great was the noise that Moses and Joshua on their way down from the mountain could

hear it, and Moses dropped and broke the two stone tablets containing the ten commandments that he was carrying.

There followed quite a reckoning, and then Moses had to go back up the mountain again, to get the second set of stone tablets. And it was during that second visit that he ‘saw’ God, and his face began to shine, such that when he came back down, the Israelites implored him to wear a veil. So, Moses goes through a kind of transfiguration, a metamorphosis, particularly during this second mountain-top experience, while the Israelites were again left to, as it were, lick their wounds, at ground level.

Now, obviously, we shouldn’t condone the Israelites’ behaviour even though we might have some sympathy for it. But what we should learn from this story is firstly, that there are dangers associated with staying at ground level, particularly if we feel as though we’re not the chosen ones who get the mountain-top experiences, and we might be tempted to do something stupid as a result. And secondly, we should learn how to live faithfully at ground level, accepting the trudge, and welcoming the high spots, whatever they may be, even though they’re not mountain-high.

What of Jesus’s disciples and the others left at ground level while Jesus and the three disciples head up the mountain? Well, they don’t get to know about the transfiguration since, as we saw, Jesus forbids Peter, James and John to disclose what happened. So, in that sense, they’re kept in the dark. And meanwhile, they’re confronted with an epileptic who they are unable to heal. And it takes a slightly frustrated Jesus, when He returns from the mountain, to do so, and then to explain to the disciples that it was their “little faith” that was the cause of their failure. Indeed, He goes on to say that had they faith the size of a mustard seed, they could move mountains – not just climb them but transplant them! (Matt. 17: 20-21).

Now again, we might well have some sympathy with those who are left at ground level. But what we should learn from this is that faith is expected of us, even if we don’t get the mountain-top experiences, even if we’re kept in the dark. And Jesus, in His response to the disciples, clearly implies that faith can grow and develop at ground level.

Well, let’s leave all that for a moment and think a bit about mountain-top experiences and transfiguration. And all I’ve said about ground-level isn’t to say that we won’t have, may well already have had, mountain-top experiences, particularly if we think of them as being not just physical, but emotional and/or spiritual. And, indeed, one of the reasons why I wanted to climb Helvellyn, starting out from Rydal Hall, was that I had done precisely that almost exactly 50 years ago. My College Christian Union used to hold an Easter retreat there and, by tradition, we climbed Helvellyn before dawn on the final day! So, I have been on the top of that mountain, with Red Tarn below, as the sun came up. And back down in time for breakfast! Gosh, we were young then! So, it was some

mountain-top experience, certainly physical and probably (though I fail to recall in detail) emotional and even spiritual.

Now it is the case that every Christian is called to be transformed or transfigured.¹ Both terms refer to a change of shape or arrangement, not to becoming something or someone completely different. We are to embrace being the same person (the same stuff, or essence), but differently configured: not to reject what God has made us and called “good”, but to reshape the stuff of which we are made, to rearrange it into a better pattern, according to God’s true design. This is a message that what we are now is not what we must always be. Somehow, we must gradually be changed into the person God made us and means us to be.

Alongside the Gospel accounts of Jesus’s being transfigured, two other passages of scripture reflect on this concept of Christian transfiguration or metamorphosis. One is Romans 12.2: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be ‘metamorphosed’ by the renewing of your minds so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.” The other is 2 Corinthians 3.18: “And all of us, with unveiled faces [a reference back to Moses], seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.”

Now mountain-top experiences can be significant in that process of transformation. Joshua, who accompanied Moses up the mountain the first time, succeeded Moses and led the Israelites into the Promised Land, and his mountain-top experience with Moses may well have been part of the preparation for that. Peter, James and John graduated from being fishermen to become leading apostles in the early church, and it seems from a comment that Peter makes in his second letter that the mountain-top experience was part of that transformation: “We had been eyewitnesses of his majesty ... while we were with him on the holy mountain ... So, we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed” (2 Peter 1:16-19). In other words, they had seen and heard for themselves the divinity of Christ, and were so convinced of that as to base their lives on it from then-on.

So, if you have had or do have the opportunity to experience a mountain top, make the most of it! This might just be chance, according to the grace of God. Or you might be helped by putting yourself in the way of God on a retreat or a pilgrimage. Strangely, even Lent, which is normally a wilderness experience, might become a kind of mountain-top experience as we spend time with God in prayer and fasting.

But, we also need to be aware that the transformation, the metamorphosis that we are called to doesn’t *depend* on such experiences. Most of life, most of the time, is spent at ground level. And metamorphosis can and does take place just as much here as on a mountain top. There are, as we noted, potential dangers associated with staying at

¹ This section from Cally Hammond, Church Times 13th February 2026.

ground level, feeling as though we're not the chosen ones who get the mountain-top experiences. But our job is to learn how to live faithfully at ground level, accepting the trudge, welcoming the high spots even though they're not mountain-high, and through these being changed more fully into the person God made us and means us to be.

Amen