

View from the Mountain Top – Ephesians 1: 15-23 & Luke 24: 44-53
Sermon for Ascension Day 18 May 2023 (Rev Phil Wootton)

It was in 1930 that the 23-year-old Alfred Wainwright first visited the Lake District from his home in Blackburn. Having alighted from the train at Windermere he climbed the path that starts across the road from the station and goes to the viewpoint of Orrest Head. He later wrote, "*...quite suddenly, we emerged from the trees and were on a bare headland, and, as though a curtain had dramatically been torn aside, beheld a truly magnificent view. ...*" Lakeland spreads out before you – the shimmering waters of Windermere; then the fells – to the far right, the great lump of Fairfield; then, the nobly-ness of Loughrigg with Helm Crag behind; the extraordinary rocket-like peaks of Langdale; the Coniston Fells looming; and the gentling out of the hills to the south. To Alfred Wainwright, the hills cried out, Climb me! And he did, explore, climb, write and draw; producing his Pictorial Guides that have inspired so many to explore and climb after him. Today, I can go public on the completion of a personal ambition of 20 years, to walk all 214 summits identified as 'Wainwrights!'

To get from here to Ascension Day, I need to go via various Biblical mountains. Let's start at Mount Nebo, in present-day Jordan. Here Moses had a similar panoramic view. Like Wainwright on Orrest Head, from here he got to look over the Promised Land – the Jordan Valley and the Dead Sea and Judean heights beyond; the land they'd dreamed of for so long; the land flowing with milk and honey. It was for the next generation to go and explore and occupy. Moses wouldn't get there, but his was the vision that his people would inhabit.

Coming to the New Testament, it was the devil who first took Jesus up a mountain to present him with a view. On the Mount of Temptation, he showed him the kingdoms of the world spread out before him and said you can have them if only you worship me. Of course, Jesus said No – power was not the point. There could be no shortcuts in bringing good news to the world.

And so it is only at the end of the Gospels that Jesus gets his disciples to look out from the mountain top. In Matthew, after he has been through it all, Jesus leads them up a certain mountain in Galilee. For Matthew, Galilee seems to represent a staging post away into the wider world. It is 'Galilee of the Gentiles,' after all. We imagine Jesus sweeping his hand over the landscape – a hand still bearing the scars of crucifixion –and saying, 'All authority is given to me ... so you go; go to all the nations and make disciples.' That's your vision: get going.

Finally, we get to the Mount of Ascension, described by Luke alone, first in his Gospel and again in the Acts of the Apostles. The place is identified as near Bethany on the Mount of Olives, from where you can look across to and down on the city of Jerusalem – its walls and gateways, its streets and houses, its palaces and fortresses, and its glorious Temple. Mark it well, Jesus seems to be saying, for this is to be the launch pad for your

mission. Start where you know. Start by looking hard at what's familiar to you. Gather strength; strength from the Holy Spirit will come to you. But keep the vision.

'Repentance and forgiveness in his name will be preached to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.' It's a promise, not a command. It will happen. I'm sure they had never thought how people from all nations would come to them at Pentecost, which meant they got a head start by witnessing to those in the city on that day. Through them, the message will get out to all sorts of places, so when missions are set up later, they're not heading into a vacuum. The message has got there first.

Ascension Day begins with a view – a view from the mountain top – and a vision of what's going to happen. But then, as so often happens on mountain tops, the view disappears; the clouds roll in and visibility is lost. Jesus stepped into the cloud. Of course, for him it was no mere meteorological incident. Return to heaven was not about a using a celestial ladder, or a sudden reversal of gravity. He stepped into the cloud of the divine presence. Like the pillar of cloud that accompanied the Israelites; like the cloud that enveloped Moses on Mount Sinai, or wrapped around Jesus, Moses and Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration, this is the cloud of God's nearer presence that shields human eyes from what is beyond seeing.

The disciples worshipped. They worshipped there and then, on the mountain, and then they worshipped day after day in the Temple. I imagine them being still and silent in the presence of God, and I imagine them noisy, worshipping with songs and shouts and praise. Our passage from Ephesians gives a sense of worshipping the mystery. Their physical eyes could see nothing, but, as St Paul prays for all, the eyes of their hearts were be enlightened to know the glorious riches of the inheritance of the saints. Wonder at the glory of Christ exalted to his Father's side. Wonder that all powers and authorities are placed under his feet (feet that, incidentally, still bear the scars of crucifixion). Wonder that his reign is expressed on earth in and through the church (in all its human fallibility). Be amazed at what God is doing through his Christ, King Jesus.

It was through worship they prepared for the coming of the Holy Spirit. It was through the contemplation of the mystery of God that they were equipped, empowered and enabled for the service they were about to undertake. Ascension Day is about opening the eyes of our hearts to a true vision of God's glory in Christ, exalted over the world; and opening our physical eyes, as it were from the mountain tops, to see the world in its magnificence, to delight in its diversity, and to sense its need. Then, let us be ready to receive power from on high, to do our job as witnesses, so that repentance and the forgiveness of sins may reach out to those around us, and across the horizon, into all the world.