

Mountain View – Sermon for the Feast of the Transfiguration (Luke 9: 28-36)
Sunday Praise 6 August 2023 (Rev Phil Wootton)

As is widely known, I like hill and mountain climbing (and I know I'm not the only one). This picture is of Brown Clee in Shropshire, from last weekend. But why do we do it, us hill-walkers? What are the attractions? Some say, just because 'it's there'! For others, it's the satisfaction you can make it, or for the exercise. Getting a good view helps, either for the wow factor, or for seeing your route. For some it's the remoteness – getting away from it all. But is there spiritual benefit? Do we get nearer to God the higher we go?



Jesus, Peter, James and John went up a mountain. The Bible doesn't say which one, but from early times this event was linked with Mount Tabor. My picture isn't the greatest (sorry) – probably taken out of a coach window. As you can see, Mount Tabor is very much a stand-alone hill.

It's on the edge of the Jezreel Valley, between Galilee and the Mediterranean coast. To me, it looks a bit like the Wrekin ... but actually quite a bit bigger! An aerial view (from the Israel Tourist board) shows the switch-back road to get up there today. It takes real effort!



So, thinking the list of reasons we gave earlier, why would Jesus and his three closest companions make the effort to go up this big hill? Was it just because it was there? Was it for the exercise? Was it for the view? Well, it's worth pausing to take a look at the view, because it's a good one! But they didn't see it, did they, because there was a black cloud that descended over them.

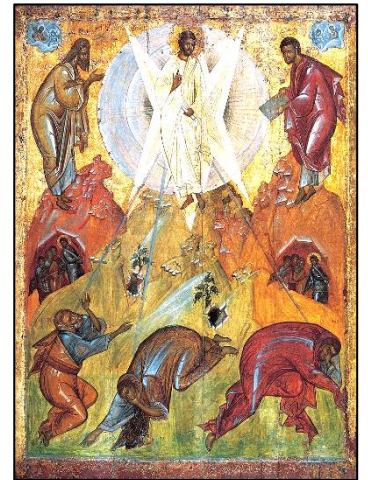
We put on our list 'spiritual benefits' and that's got to be the case. This event is described in three of the four Gospels, and in Luke's, which we heard this morning, it says they went to pray, pure and simple. But that begs the question, why there? Can't you pray anywhere? But there's something about making a special effort; something about getting apart from other people and every day concerns; and something about a history of God doing special things on mountains – altogether it means this hike was worthwhile.

Now, you remember from the story Peter volunteered to build three structures on the mountain top – one for Jesus, one for Moses and one for Elijah – almost as if he thought they needed buildings to pray in. Well, you go there nowadays and find people have done what he said. You can go and pray in church – there are at least two of them – and the Catholic one has three chapels (one for Jesus, one for Moses and one for Elijah). When there, we had Communion in the Elijah chapel.



They went to pray, and prayer is transformative. It changes situations. It certainly changed Jesus' appearance on this occasion: transfigured, with face and clothes shining with dazzling light. You could say that through prayer on the mountain, the disciples got a much better view than they'd bargained for: not a physical view but a spiritual one.

The traditional way of showing Jesus' Transfiguration is with an icon. An icon is a very stylised form of picture, because what's important isn't anything physical but the spiritual meaning. We see Jesus at the top in dazzling brightness, as if he inhabits a star. Beams of light come from Jesus, dazzling the disciples' eyes so they start tumbling back down the mountain. It's all too much for them. And it should be! At this moment, in Jesus, the Lord God almighty is breaking out. The man they have known as a wandering rabbi in Galilee is being revealed as truly Son of God. Of course, it's too much! The glory of God shines on him and from him and through him. There is a view, if you dare look: a view of who he truly is.



Peter, James and John also glimpse that Jesus is with two other people – Moses and Elijah – two of the greatest figures of the Old Testament. Moses received the Law from God on Mount Sinai. Elijah defeated the priests of Baal on Mount Carmel. Meeting with them on this mountain top connects with the long journey God has brought his people, the big story of the Bible up to now. Then, 'They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfilment at Jerusalem.' It is as if, on Mount Tabor, they look at the route map Jesus will follow, the road to Jerusalem, and all that his death will achieve.



This final picture doesn't look like it's got anything to do with the Transfiguration. The mountain has disappeared altogether. Jesus is represented by a huge cross, as it were, suspended against the stars. The figures of Moses and Elijah, looking unusually young, are named (so it must be them!) Out of the glory of a brilliant gold and red background, right at the top a hand represents the voice of God the Father. Three sheep look longingly upwards – surely Peter on one side and James and John on the other, whilst the line of sheep at the bottom stand for the other disciples waiting below. Around them is a beautifully verdant display of trees and flowers and shrubs. It's a new paradise. Jesus' transfiguration is not just about his appearance changing. It's ultimately about the transformation of the world. The final view from the mountain is of a world transformed. It is a vision that all that has grown tired and stale and rotten in the world, and in ourselves, will be transfigured to new life by the power of the divine light, through the sacrificial love of the one who makes his departure in Jerusalem.

So, celebrate the Transfiguration for the view: the view of who Jesus truly is and how he wants us to know him; the view of the journey taken so far and what is still to come (his and ours); and the view of the creation transfigured in the light of the one who made it. It's worth getting up that mountain!