**Mountain-Tops and Mess**

*Matthew 17:9, 14-23*

***[pray if not prayed before]***

**Introduction**

Recently I went to visit a friend in Sheffield, and I think I managed to take a few years off the clutch of my car by trying to parallel park in front of his house – one of the steepest roads I’ve driven on, and there was definitely a smell of burning in the air when I finished. But some of the most impressive mountains I’ve seen were actually in Austria. Now, my older sister is a big, big fan of the film “the Sound of Music”, so a few years ago she organised a trip to Salzburg, the city where most of the movie was filmed. For me this trip largely involved taking pictures of her in various poses from the film, the gardens, the nunnery, the conservatory/gazebo thing, everywhere. One of the things my sister had booked us on was a coach tour out of the city into the surrounding mountains to see some of the sites from the film which were a bit further afield. As we were driving along, the people on the tour were signing the songs from the film, which you might have gathered by now is not really my scene. But this coach tour was one of the highlights of that trip, and that was because of the scenery. As we climbed up into the alps every bend in the road brought with it the view of another incredible valley, with the sun shining on green grassy slopes on either side of a vibrant blue lake, with snow-capped mountains far off in the distance and birds flying low over the water or rising up to the skies. Even Salzburg airport as we were leaving is incredible, giving amazing views of the mountains again as you take off.

But then after spending two hours cramped in a flying tube, we were back at Stansted airport, and I made my way back home to Cambridge, to the fens. Where the furthest thing you can see is the trees at the other end of the field and every bend in the road brings with it… some roadworks.

This morning I’m going to be speaking about something with which we here in Cambridgeshire don’t have much experience – mountains and valleys. Fortunately, what we’re going to be talking about is mainly metaphorical.

The mountain-top of the holiday: relaxing, new experiences, getting away from it all.

The valleys of the hard times: when things go wrong, when you feel completely out of control when things are just beyond your understanding.

And the part we do know well - the ‘fens’ of normal life: the regular, daily, weekly routine. When life appears to be going well, *taking care of itself*.

**Mountain-top meets the mess – the father**

Let’s turn to the bible now. This passage we’re looking at now immediately follows what’s called the “transfiguration” – which we looked at last week. Here’s what happened ***[Read 17:1-8]***.

Peter, James and John, have just had the ultimate “mountain-top” experience. They’ve seen a glimpse of Jesus’ full glory as the curtain of heaven has been drawn back and his face and clothes have shone like the brightest light in the sky. They’ve seen Moses and Elijah, representing all the law and the prophets, all of history up to this point, conversing with Jesus there. Peter has tried to build tents so they can stay in that place for longer. They’ve even heard the voice of God clearly with their own ears – something which has terrified them and sent adrenaline pumping through their veins. Imagine the excitement they’re feeling, the high they’re on, as they come down the mountain, hearts racing, not able to comprehend, understand all they’ve seen and yet sure it’s something glorious.

Perhaps there are elements of that high to which you can relate. To the feeling that every corner can bring another breath-taking lake, every moment something new and wonderful. A blissful holiday, a new relationship, those first moments spent with a newly-born child. If you’ve been a Christian for a while perhaps you can remember times of wonderful spiritual growth – a period when you’ve been stuck your regular bible reading and every day you’re uncovering new depths of relationship with God, maybe a summer camp when you were challenged and built up by all those who were around you, a Sunday service you came away from on a spiritual high, rejoicing in God’s goodness. These are glorious moments when they come, when we experience great blessings, when we look to Christ, see the true scope of our worries, and experience God as he speaks in scripture, through others around us, and to our hearts.

Yet so quickly these moments fade, and so often the high of the mountain-top is followed by a slump into a dark valley. Jesus and the disciples come down from the mount of transfiguration, this ultimate spiritual experience, and enter into a messy situation. The crowds which seem to gather wherever they go are here again, and there’s a distraught father. He’s got his son with him, disfigured with burns, on edge against fits which may come at any time. It’s clear that something has gone wrong with the disciples who stayed behind – even though they should have been able to help – and the crowd is restless. The father though, driven by intense grief, is immediately pleading with Jesus, begging Jesus to help him.

Stop and consider for a moment what brings a father to this point. A good father who has taken on the role of protector and provider for his family and for his child, who would never normally be seen begging at someone else’s feet. Yet this father must watch his son be taken in seizures, thrown into fires to suffer terrible burns or falling into rivers and risking drowning. The father feels powerless to do anything for the son he loves. The disciples have let him down, and he has been left utterly helpless.

*Application*

Are there areas in which you feel utterly helpless? Maybe for you, like the father, it’s health issues of those you love, or even your own. Physical, mental, even spiritual struggles. Perhaps you feel in a helpless situation financially because of debt or the loss of a job. Perhaps it’s a relationship which looks like it has been broken beyond repair, like there’s no way to restore things to how they once were. Maybe it’s a feeling of inadequacy in certain situations, with all you are responsible for there. Maybe you feel helpless as you try and share the truth about Jesus with a loved friend, a sister, or a child who has turned away from it. Maybe you feel helpless as you look at a society around us which is moving further and further away from values founded on Christian truths. There are so many ways in which we can feel helpless in our lives, areas which leave us feeling like we’re in the darkest of valleys.

This passage has good news for us as we find ourselves in valleys. For those situations where we feel utterly helpless. Look with me at what happens in verse 18 ***[read v18]***. Jesus hears the man, he comes to him, sees his pain, and sees his faith. And with a word, Christ heals the boy. He rebukes the demon which can do nothing but flee before him, and in that instant, this boy who from childhood has suffered so greatly, is healed.

We see here first that even in the darkest valley, when all hope seems to be lost, when it seems nothing can help; Jesus is there. Even when everything and everybody else has let us down, in those situations where it seems nothing can help and nobody understands, Jesus does not remain on the mountain, but comes down into the valley, and we can turn to Him. He is near to us, and, second he is powerful to bring healing there. Jesus recognises the pain of the situation and has compassion. He recognises the faith of the father – faltering as it may be, but faith nonetheless.

When things are tough, when we are in valleys, there can be a temptation to turn away from Jesus. To say he’s not here, he doesn’t care, he can’t do anything about it. But see here that is not true. Jesus comes down the mountain, he meets us in our struggles, he has compassion, and he can bring healing. What do we gain by turning away from Christ in the hard times? Nothing. Instead we lose our greatest comfort, our ultimate hope. We lose the one who cares, and can bring ultimate healing.

And in the father here we begin to see the role which the valleys can play in our life. In the father we see a faith that has been refined by the fires of intense trials, as everything else which he has looked to for salvation has let him down. We see a faith that has had all else stripped away until only Christ remains. A faltering but genuine faith next to which the people of the day can only be described a “crooked and perverse generation”. Don’t misunderstand me – the son’s condition is a terribly sad thing, it is the result of living in a fallen world, a world infected by sin. Yet even this God can turn to good. While so many people were rejecting Jesus, this man’s trials have driven him to Christ, and sometimes trials will have a similar role in our lives. The Victorian preacher Charles Spurgeon experienced great trials mentally, physically, relationally, throughout his life, yet he was able to say – “*I have learned to [bless] the waves that throw me up against the Rock of Ages*”. Sometimes the waves of life are what we need to turn us to Christ himself, the rock of ages.

**Mountain-moving in the mundane – the disciples**

We’ve looked at the father, in the deepest valley. Let’s turn our attention now to the disciples. That is, the 9 disciples who didn’t go up the mount of transfiguration with Jesus. We see in v16 that they had already had a go at healing the son’s condition, at casting out the demon at the root cause of it. And they failed. As this distraught father had come before them they had perhaps commanded the demon to come out, or put their hands upon the boy, but nothing had happened. They’d let the father down – and they themselves were shaken and embarrassed as they come to Jesus in private later to ask what happened, why couldn’t they do?

Way back in chapter 10 of Matthew we’re told that all 12 disciples were given authority to cast out demons and to heal every kind of disease – ***[read 10:1, 8]***. Presumably this is something they’ve done since then, something they’ve done many times – so what’s going on here? Why this time are they unable to help the father’s son? The disciples are shaken that this power they had appears to have left them.

Well Jesus begins to explain it in the later verses ***[read v19-20]***. He says the reason they have failed is because they have so little faith. And yet if they only had faith the size of a mustard seed they would have been able to! A mustard seed – the smallest kind of seed, barely a speck of dust. To have less faith than that is to effectively have no faith. So what’s Jesus saying here - how can that be? How can the disciples who heard from Jesus’ own lips the declaration of the authority given to them to drive out demons and heal every kind of disease, the disciples who have seen Jesus perform such feats and themselves perhaps have done many – how can they have not faith that *they* can do it this time as well?

Well I wonder if that’s exactly it. I wonder if they began to think that *they* could do it. That each of them had the power to do this in themselves. I wonder if these displays of God’s power, authenticating his teaching wherever it went, became normal to them. I wonder if they began to lose sight of the fact that they were utterly dependent on God in everything they did. I wonder if these things had become normal to them, and their faith was no longer in the power of the living God, in Jesus power, but in themselves.

*Application*

Because that’s so easy to do, isn’t it? It’s easy to see God in the highs, and sometimes the valleys are the very thing which draw us to Christ. But what about when we get used to it? What once was a high just seems normal to us. When God has greatly blessed us, when things are ticking along as they should. Isn’t it easy in those times to forget God? We don’t recognise the abundant good things God has blessed us with – a healthy church full of loving people, the bible in our hands which we can read and engage with every day, a country where we have the right to proclaim Jesus’ name from the rooftops. Jobs, houses, friends. Holidays to the alps. All gifts of grace, all gifts of God.

If you have a church bible you’ll see there’s a little note where verse 21 should be, which refers to the bottom of the page where it says something like ***[read note]***. Marks 9:29 says ***[read Mark 9:29]***. The disciple’s complacency has led them to command in their own name, rather than pray. They rely on themselves, rather than talking to the almighty one of heaven who they can call father.

Reflect for a moment – in what ways do you presume upon God’s grace? Do you take for granted all the good things he has given you? Do you rely on Him for continued provision? Have his blessings become ordinary for you? In what areas do you end up thinking you’re good on your own – you’ve done it many times; you don’t need God in this area?

I was challenged this week thinking about this for our local church here in Emmanuel. I fail to pray for the church because it’s there and functioning, and things come together every week. When I’m on a rota I don’t spend much time praying that I would welcome people well, do the tech well, even lead the service well – because I’ve done it before, I know how to do it. I can do it. And beyond my own role every week and throughout the week there’s such a great deal happening so that I am *so* blessed when we gather together and when we go out. Do I pray for Josh and Alan as they shepherd the church? Do I pray for the evangelists amongst us who are particularly gifted in meeting new people and introducing them to Christ? For the parents and the children’s Sunday school teachers, bringing up the children in godliness. The musicians, the people who invite me for lunch, and the techies. For the practical aspects of church life – finances, a building in which to meet, enough chairs so we can welcome guests. So many things which I receive so regularly and in such abundance, that I forget it’s God's blessing not our effort or our ‘right’, or even just the way things are.

That’s just taking church as an example – there are so many situations from daily life in which we take God’s regular provision for granted. For food 3 times a day. When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he instructed them to say “give us today, our daily bread”. Food is in such abundance that I rarely (if ever) acknowledge that it’s God who provides for me.

When we do this, when we don’t turn to God for his power to be at work, we deprive God of the glory and honour which is rightfully his. But we also deprive ourselves. We miss out. Jesus’ illustration is that right faith, faith placed in him, faith the size of a speck of dust is enough to move mountains. This is an invitation to explore the extent of God’s generosity, to delve into the depths of his goodness and love. A faith that can move mountains – imagine what else could be achieved? The greatest satisfaction. Contentment in Christ. Even restoring the rebellious heart of a sinner to relationship with their God.

Jesus made this invitation clear already in his sermon on the mount, where he said ***[read Matt 7:8-11]***. God is willing to give good gifts to his children. This explains why we don’t see mountains jumping into the sea – because God gives good gifts. But have the boldness to ask, in the confidence that if it is good, it will be given! People sometimes talk about “fear of missing out”. Whenever we don’t ask Christ to have control of an area of our life we are truly missing out.

**The Mountain of the Lord – the Christ**

So we’ve looked at the mess of the father and his son and the healing they recieved, and we’ve looked at the disciple’s presumption on the power of God. Let’s turn our attention finally to the main character of the narrative – of the entire bible – Jesus Christ.

In the recent chapters of Matthew, we’ve seen that tension has been building for Jesus. He’s been rejected by the those in the town he grew up in – people he’s known all his life. He’s learnt of the terrible beheading of his cousin and God’s prophet John the Baptist. He’s performed great miracles – feeding thousands of people from a packed lunch, walking on water. Yet he’s constantly been hounded by the religious elite who demand more signs, more evidence – or even accuse him of being in league with the prince of demons. Even his own disciples have let him down, taking their eyes off him, misunderstanding his teaching.

But on the mount of transfiguration he’s taken himself away with his closest friends. And not just got away from it all, but experienced his relationship with his father in the most tangible way throughout all of his earthly life. The son who from eternity was in relation with the father was there on the mountain top able to momentarily experience that again in his humanity. Face radiant, shining like the brightest light in the sky. Clothes so white they seem to be made of light itself. Surely he would stay here forever if he could!

But as we’ve already seen, he doesn’t. Christ knows why he has come, and he descends from the mountain, to meet the father, and the restless crowds, and the unbelieving disciples. He comes down and sees a people who could be enjoying the blessings found in God and in himself, but instead focussed on themselves. Christ leaves the mountaintop to enter into the valley.

What we have captured here in these verses in this chapter of Matthew’s account of Jesus life, is a picture of the entire story of salvation. Christ, the lord, Jesus, leaving the glory, joy, communion of His Father’s presence. Conceived by the Holy Spirit, he entered into a broken and sinful world. He suffered, terribly, under Pontius Pilate. Was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead. Jesus Christ left the highest of all mountains, and entered the darkest of all valleys.

In the passage of Matthew we’re looking at Jesus himself points to this full story, as he predicts his death for the second time. Have a look at what he says in v22-23 ***[read Matt 17:22-23]***. Jesus descends from the mount of transfiguration, and brings healing to the boy in the valley, but the son of man had already descended from the heavens, into the valley of a sinful world. Was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead – on the third day he would rise again. And because he rose, that cross, that tomb, which appeared to be the darkest valley, we realise actually building the highest mountain as he made a way for every person to be free from the sin that so easily entangles, to be returned to right relationship with God, and to enjoy the joyous blessings of Christ himself.

On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

Here in this passage we have the story of Christ Jesus, who ***[Reading Philippians 2:6-9].***

This is the gospel story, but it doesn’t even stop there. There’s another bend. When Jesus hears about the failure of the disciples to drive out the demon in v17 he says about the faithlessness around Him ***[read v17]***. “How long? How long? How long shall I stay with you – teaching and re-teaching, performing miracle after miracle. And you still don’t get it.” And he says “how long shall I *put up* with you? How much tolerance and patience do I need to show you? How long shall I go on, until I stop being so patient and begin my judgement?” How long will Jesus put up with unbelievers and sinners?

That’s not just a rhetorical question for the listeners then. That’s a vitally important question for us now. Jesus came, died, ascended to heaven, and one day will come to judge the living and the dead. One day he will end his patience and begin his righteous rule. He will bring judgement in its fullness.

*Application*

Do you see the story of the bible, laid out for us here in this little section? There is great pain in this world, but the ultimate problem, what lies at the bottom of all of it, is what the bible calls sin. Yet Jesus came to bring healing. If you have not yet put your faith in Christ Jesus, if you are still putting your faith in other things to bring that healing, lasting contentment, identity, let me tell you you’re missing out. Both in this life, and, ultimately, on the last day when Jesus returns. The bible says it is impossible to please God without faith. Place your faith in Christ today as your Lord and saviour.

And if you have placed your faith in Jesus Christ, see again here the full story of what Jesus suffered to win you for himself. Look to him again, mine the depths of Christ’s goodness and all the blessings which are available in himself. Let Christ lift you onto the mountain of relationship with him. Place your hope in the truth of an everlasting life to come.

**Close**

We’ve looked at the father going through the darkest valley. The disciples with their misplaced faith. And Christ, the son of man, who enters the valley, and lifts us up to the mountain. Let’s take a moment of quiet now to reflect on what we’ve heard, after which Josh will come up again to close off our time together.