**Sermon Transfiguration C. *Light from the Mountain.***

February 27th 2022. Exodus 34:29-35, Luke 9:28-36

Less than twenty people in the whole history of humanity have walked on the surface of the moon. Those few who did were all comparatively young and destined to live most of their lives after their big moment. They all came back to Earth, but some of them really came back with a bump. As an astronaut there really is nowhere to go after this, it generally marked the last hurrah of their career and what came next? Business maybe or teaching? Some came back to Earth with a renewed energy and a sense of meaning and purpose while for others their best day was forever behind them, they returned to a sense of loss, depression maybe, the end of relationships and in some cases alcohol abuse. To walk on the surface of the Moon must top our possible mountain top experiences.

The “mountain top experience” has entered in to our language, it suggests both a physical and emotional high. Being on the mountain top, whether literally or metaphorically, gives you a grand view – everything is spread out like a patchwork beneath you and there is the achievement, the elation, the revelling in the moment even if the climb has exhausted us.

Yet here’s the thing with mountain tops, there isn’t an awful lot of room for manoeuvre and, while the view might be to die for they are pretty uncomfortable. We have to trek down from our peaks, be they mountains or the summit of our achievement, and go back to the workaday world of the valley below. Hillary and Tensing were never going to build a couple of units on the peak of Everest, once the flag has been raised and the anthem played the gold medal winning Olympian has to get down and return to the humdrum of training, and even if an academic wins a Nobel Prize they still have to return to the so-so world of routine.

Today we are offered a mountain top experience, with the understanding that we have to go down the mountain into the valley below. This experience marks the cusp of change, one season of the church’s year ends and another is about to begin. We always hear this story on the Sunday before Lent. Over the next few weeks Jesus journeys towards Jerusalem and to the prospect of his death, as the long shadows of its inevitability fall we have this story to fortify ourselves, a hint of a light which nothing – even death – can overcome.

Sometimes I issue health warning about certain scripture readings; little notices to be aware of quite what we are reading and what it means and today I hereby issue you my first health warning. Sometimes we read this story of how Jesus, who one moment is a bloke walking up a hill with three of his mates and then is suddenly full of God’s own presence in ways which lead to some exceedingly bad theology.

One of the defining struggles of Christian thought has been just how Jesus, who was clearly and evidently a human being, is also divine; about how the fullness of God was pleased to dwell in this particular life. I won’t bore you with the twists and turns of a debate which raged for centuries and led, among other things, to street brawls in Constantinople, but the orthodox, or classical, position is that however much we struggle with the logic of it here is someone who is both fully human and truly divine and that neither his humanity or divinity can be sacrificed for the sake of the other.

Yet how many people sit in churches today and hear this story as a sort of Superman theology? You remember Superman don’t you? The alien child sent to Earth, faster, stronger and cleverer than a mere human yet raised as one of us , becoming the mild mannered reporter Clark Kent, who when the need arose, would disappear into a telephone box and emerge as Kalel of the Planet Krypton; or more commonly Superman.

Superman’s humanity – his being Clark Kent – wasn’t real. It was a disguise to hide his alien self which was more powerful than mere humanity. Some people hear the story of the Transfiguration as a Superman account. For them the humanity of Jesus is a theatrical prop, a disguise which here for a brief moment slips.

To read this story in this way is a trap. However we read it, as a factual account of a moment on a hill one day or – as I do – a theological reflection by early Christians on the life and meaning of Jesus then what it really says is that his divinity is en-fleshed in his humanity not over and above it.

The story is very consciously told as an echo of the story we heard from Exodus, of Moses being summoned by God to climb Mount Sinai to receive the commandments. We are told that once Moses had climbed the mountain “ … a cloud covered it. The glory of the Lord rested on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered the mountain for six days.” Moses had the better part of a week in “the devouring fire’ of God’s presence. The theophany, the revelation of the presence of God, in the Transfiguration story is much briefer if just as wondrous.

Jesus goes with Peter, James and John go up what is described as a high mountain and on their ascent something strange happens, Jesus becomes filled with light, radiant and suddenly there was Moses – the giver of the Law – there and Elijah who was believed not to have died but to have been taken into the presence of God in a chariot of fire, the belief was that his return would herald the coming of the Messiah and, to this day, a place is set for him at every Passover meal. Our Gospel presents Jesus as someone who embodies the fulfilment of Jewish faith, hope and yearning.

Here too is someone who, unlike Moses who entered the cloud of God’s presence and Elijah, who was transported into it has that light, that sense of the divine shine out of him. It may be a subtle distinction to us but to those who first heard this story it would have spoken loudly and clearly. It would have helped them forward in a new understanding that in the life of Jesus as God had been present and working in a new way.

Well all this is quite dense isn’t it? So before we ask what all this means to us how about a humorous observation? I think Peter comes close to losing the plot in this story, his suggestion that he run up three shelters, one each for Jesus, Moses and Elijah is what psychologists call a displacement activity. It’s the power of the familiar, of routine to carry you through when facing quite unprecedented situations. No doubt if Peter had been a good kiwi Methodist he would have offered to put the jug on and make a pot of tea.

Then it’s all over, a cloud appears over the disciples and out of it booms the voice of God; “This is my beloved son, in whom I delight, listen to him.” T

The Matthew account of this story is more dramatic in that the three disciples fall in holy terror, faces to the ground. We don’t quite have that here, and the moment passes. Jesus just looks like their friend and there is no sign of Moses or Elijah.

We are told that the disciples tell no one what they saw. In Mtthew Jesus tells them to tell no one. This moment was thers, who – I wonder – would have believed them anyway?

We all have our mountain top experiences, moments of clarity, moments when it all makes sense and the landscape of the future opens up before us. When did you discover what would be your life work? When did you realise that here was someone you loved deeply and wanted to share your life with? But say you realise you want to be a doctor, a master chef, or – heaven forbid – a minister. However clear your moment of realisation there is a long trek through the valley below on the way to achieving your goal. However clear and heart felt your love is for her or him there is a lifetime’s work in making and sustaining that relationship.

Later on in the Gospel Peter, who had offered to make shelters for Jesus, Moses and Elijah, seems to forget about this particular mountain top experience. In Jesus’ moment of need and as Jesus faced his death Peter, fearing for his life, melts away into the background. Whatever our mountaintop experience, we need to take a spark of the light we find there with us into the valley below, that we might find energy, hope, meaning and purpose to sustain us.

To do that we must cultivate memory. Why are we committed to this person? To this work? To this faith and community? May you and I nurture memory, that it keep the spark of purpose, meaning and hope alive through the valleys of experience before us. Until we come again to ascend the mountain and find meaning, purpose and truth laid out before us.

Amen.