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Readers' Service

by

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Number: 4

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ORDER OF SERVICE

CALL TO WORSHIP:

'When Christ is revealed, we shall be like him: for we shall see him as he is' [1 John 3:2]

HYMN: Hymns & Psalms 18

'We give immortal praise'

PRAYER:

Almighty God, gracious heavenly Father, we leave the business of everyday life, the pressure of daily demands, the ordinariness of the routine, and gather to seek the peace of your presence and the quiet of this sanctuary. We worship you; we acknowledge your glory; we respond to your love. We offer ourselves in service to you.

Yet as we come we are aware of the tensions within us. We come with a variety of emotions, a diversity of needs, with joys and with sorrows, with ease and with unease, with contentment and with frustration. So we come desirous of sharing with you what we are so that through the influence of your Spirit we may grow to maturity of faith and life as followers of your Son, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Mindful of our weakness and frailty, and conscious above all of our sinfulness which destroys our relationship with you and with each other, we seek your forgiveness. We ask you to touch our hearts, to heal our hurts, to direct our wills, to cleanse our spirits and to renew our lives. We do so in the conviction that you have revealed your glory in the face of Jesus in order that we might know that although you are the Creator you have drawn near to us in him.

We come believing that in his humiliation we see your love triumphing over sin and death that those who believe may have eternal life. We come trusting that in this time together we may for a short time stand on the mountain -top and glimpse your glory, sense your love, experience your power. Then, O God, send us down into the affairs of the valley, renewed for service, sharing in the ministry of Jesus in this your world. AMEN.

PSALM: 96 (Hymns & Psalms 866)

OLD TESTAMENT: Exodus 34:29-35 Moses delivers the law to the people, who see he had been with God

HYMN: Hymns & Psalms 59

'The Lord Jehovah reigns'

NEW TESTAMENT: Mark 9:2-9; 14-20 The Transfiguration of Jesus

HYMN: Hymns & Psalms 156

'How good, Lord, to be here'

SERMON: (SEE ATTACHED SHEETS)

HYMN: Hymns & Psalms 459

'God, your glory we have seen in your Son'

or Hymns & Psalms 184

'With glorious clouds encompassed round'

PRAYERS:

O God of the mountain-top, we pray that those who search for you may glimpse your glory and hear your voice.

O God of law and prophecy, we pray that the rule of your word and the grace of your love may govern our lives.

O God of the Lord Jesus, the light of the world, we pray that the radiance of his being may enlighten the heart and illuminate the mind with the knowledge of your being.

O God of the disciples of Jesus, we pray that the example of the faith of those who surround us as a cloud of witnesses may inspire us in our following of our Lord.

O God of the valley, we pray that when faced with the challenges of every day life, we may act with faith, to heal, to deliver, to witness and to serve.

So we turn in prayer for the world, for all people in their need.

We commend to you those whose well-being is marred by conflict, exploited by greed, harmed by injustice, stunted by oppression. May they find liberty, tolerance, equality, and be affirmed in human rights and dignity.

We pray for those to whom has been committed the responsibility of government and the leadership of nations and institutions., May they have such a vision of your glory as will lead to their searching for truth and justice, freedom and peace, for all peoples.

In particular, we pray for

Lord in your mercy HEAR OUR PRAYER

We pray for the Church, claimed to proclaim the triumph of your love.
We pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ. Enable them to bold in face of the evils of our age; to challenge reliance upon material possession; to question attitudes and behaviour which sacrifice the individual for the system; to oppose such use of resources as destroy life and despoil the planet.

We commend to you those whom you have called to serve as leaders of your people. May they be good and wise, strong and courageous, faithful and true. We pray that they may lead us into better relationships between the various denominations that through such reconciliation the Church may be the sign and the agent of reconciliation in a divided world.

We pray especially for

Lord in your mercy HEAR OUR PRAYER

We pray for ourselves, called into the fellowship of those who believe in Jesus and who seek to obey your word.

We pray that your Spirit will lead us in our search for the truth as it is in Jesus; that we will be enabled in our endeavour to be one in him; that we will be strengthened in our mission to and service in your world

We pray that we may be sustained in our desire to resist temptation and lead lives worthy of our Lord; We pray that we may be granted the gift of humility, seeking not what we will but what you will; that we may be gracious in our dealings with others, seeking the good of each and all.

We pray specially for

Lord in your mercy HEAR OUR PRAYER

Accept these our prayers, O God, and work in and through us your will, through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.

THE LORD'S PRAYER:

NOTICES & OFFERING:

OFFERTORY PRAYER:

We bring our offerings to you, O God our Father, deeply conscious of the self-offering made by your Son, who both revealed your divinity and shared our humanity. We pray that what we have and what we are may be so used that others will see your glory and respond to his humility. AMEN

HYMN: Hymns & Psalms 662

'Author of faith'

DISMISSAL:

May the God of glory be with us. May we give God the glory - this day and for evermore. AMEN

SERMON

Mark 9:2fF

Mountain & Valley - the Transfiguration

There is a rhythm in life. We see it in nature. The dark deadness of winter is followed by the bright life of spring. Dormant buds show signs of bursting into leaf, rest is followed by activity, even as day follows night. We know it in our experience. A mother lulls her baby to sleep and then drifts herself into blissful quiet. For mother and child there is that quiet which enables refreshment, that relaxation which enables renewal of energy, that gathering together of revitalised strength which makes possible movement back into action when the child stirs, when the mother is required once again to give of herself out of her love for the child. That rhythm is built into the pattern of life - that developing activity which leads to birth, that nurturing which aids growth to the fullness of adult life, that reaching of the peak of ability, then the decline and the slowing down until that moment when life is stilled. There are ebbs and flows, there are crests and troughs, there are comings and goings - these different metaphors of contrast underline our awareness of the rhythm of life.

One such metaphor is that of the contrast between standing on the mountain top and walking through the valley. A tourist told of how he stood high on a Swiss mountain above Meringen looking down on the Interlaken valley. He stood in brilliant sunshine - but the valley was shrouded in mist. But for the distant clanging of cow bells he was in quietude. Way down below him, hidden from sight, was all the noise and business of the day.

That contrast highlighting the rhythm of life is found in the story of the Transfiguration. There is the contrast between the mountain and the valley, between not-knowing and knowing, between a glimpse of another world and the demands of this world, between life and death, between glory and humiliation.

Politicians may argue about the rightness and wrongs of being economic with the truth, but it is unacceptable in the Church if there is not the admission that there are passages in the Bible which are less than clear when it comes to explanation. And the story of the transfiguration is one of those passages. It is a difficult story. What was it that took place on the high mountain? Was it a physical sensory experience - that is, did the disciples actually see Moses and Elijah? or was it a vivid dream or vision? Various explanations have been given - a corporate vision; a symbolic piece of writing; a resurrection story which mistakenly has been put early in the Gospel story. We do not know - and indeed one erudite scholar has written that he doubts whether the three disciples would have been able to answer the question 'What happened?' All they could say was, in effect, 'Something happened which had a profound effect upon us'. Therefore having said that in all honesty an explanation of what happened cannot be given, nevertheless, there are conclusions to be drawn from the event. And one of the conclusions is that which is reached by thinking through the idea of contrast because of the rhythm of life.

Firstly, there is contrast as regards Jesus. Tim Rice in perceptive mood in 'Jesus Christ Superstar' has Mary Magdalene underlining the enigma which was Jesus as she sings 'I don't know how to love him'. People did not know what to make of him, and indeed some support can be given to the idea that Jesus did not know what to make of himself. The season of Lent marks it. The temptations were about Jesus struggling to find out who he was and what he was to be and to do. The desert experience questions begin with that little word 'If...' and that word implies self-questioning, a degree of doubt. The same hint is given, if the tone of the Gospel account is read aright, when Jesus questioned his disciples as to whether they will leave

him like many others were doing. Likewise there is the questioning at Caesarea Philippi. Who did people say he was? Who did his disciples think he was? Those questions were asked only six days before the transfiguration experience. In that is the contrast - one is the questioning; the other is the answering - all bound up with the identity crisis which Jesus was faced with time and time again as pressure was brought to bear upon him. There was his family who said 'He is out of his mind'; his friends who said 'Don't go back to Bethany, it is not long since the Jews were wanting to stone you'; the crowd, who wanted to make him king by force; the authorities, who kept looking for a chance to seize him as a trouble maker - and of course, the sensation-seekers 'If you are the Son of God, save yourself from the cross'. Such was the pressure upon Jesus to prove himself - it was bound to push him into the corner of self-doubt. No wonder in the Garden of Gethsemane he agonised in prayer 'Take this cup from me'

So what kept him going? The contrast. If at Caesarea Philippi he had the affirmation from his followers as to their view that he was the Messiah - God's anointed saviour of his people - then a week later the mountain-top experience affirmed for him that he was incredibly, uniquely, amazingly, the Son of God. This meant that he could go down into the valley below to face the misunderstandings of his followers, the demands of the crowds, the opposition of the authorities, - and on to a tortuous trial, to suffering, crucifixion and death. From the glory of the mountain-top he went to the humiliation of the valley. And he was able to do so because over-riding any doubt, any fear, any suffering, was that inner conviction confirmed on the mountain 'This is my beloved Son; listen to him' [Mark 9:7]. It was that which carried him through the Garden of Gethsemane in the Valley of the Kidron 'Take this cup from me. Yet not my will but yours' [Mk 14:36]

Therefore, do not believe in a Jesus so insulated from fears and concerns that there could never have been a moment when he was likely to say 'What's happening to me?' or 'I cannot cope'. Do not believe in a Jesus who is so different from us that he drifts white-robed through the Gospel stories untouched by human questionings. Do not believe in a super hero Jesus of the Batman type, who in one moment is an ordinary person in glasses and then the next moment is swooping in to save and deliver by mighty manifestations of supernatural power. Do not so idolise Jesus that he becomes an a remote ideal, turned out as immaculate as the suave male models whose appearances on glossy pages show no signs of human weakness, exasperation or anger or tears or sweat or pain. Why not? Because the contrast between the mountain top and the valley reveals a Jesus who is one with us. As the writer of The Letter to the Hebrews, the one person in the New Testament who has a keen awareness of the glory of Jesus, put it, Jesus is not one who cannot feel sympathy with our human weakness. On the contrary, he is 'one who has been tested in every way as we are' [Hebrews 4:15]

Secondly, there is contrast as regards the three disciples. Their rhythm of life had been totally disrupted when Jesus came on the scene by Galilee lake - calling them to follow him. Can you imagine it? These young men, busy at their fishing business, an ordinary day, the ordinary routine - and this extraordinary man, with whom they had obviously had some contact before, arrived on the scene. As they were, where they were, he makes the bold invitation to them to follow him and become be a different type of fishermen. Life took on a new pattern, a new rhythm. It is doubtful whether it was always conducive to them. Initially, perhaps it was - they were at the heart of a movement, full of heady excitement as they became the inner circle to this teacher from Nazareth, by then settled at Capernaum. His teaching was popular, the crowds flocked around him. His works of healing were sensational - the more so in that he defied the religious establishment. That was bound to grab young people even as the challenge to authority does today. So following someone like Jesus was adventurous and exhilarating.

But it was costly - as Jesus warned would-be disciples. From the comparative security of a fishing business in which there was enough money around to hire men, these disciples found themselves living a wandering life, dependent upon the good-will of family and friends for food and hospitality. Moreover, it was risky. Other movements of the time showed how dangerous following him could be. After Herod's death, in several areas, including Galilee, bands of guerrillas or freedom-fighters - what they were called depended upon one's perspective - organised themselves into groups around charismatic leaders. When Jesus was about 8 years old, this became so out of hand that the Romans intervened, and some 2,000 Jews were imprisoned and crucified. That increased the nationalistic dreams and caused greater resentment and resistance. No wonder Jesus was initially popular. But then came the growing realisation that Jesus was not quite what many people expected him to be. He was not full of nationalistic fervour, he did not raise the standard of a resistance movement. Neither his words nor his deeds put him that category. Moreover, it was not the might of Rome but the established ways of the religious authorities which he challenged. So the disciples saw their leader abandoned by those whose expectations he did not fulfill and attacked by those whose life and teaching he rejected. Therefore after the heady, successful mountain top days of Galilee, there came the uncertain, menacing, valley bottom days wandering outside the region because wily Herod Antipas was out to get him.

No wonder the transfiguration, the mountain-top experience was such the Peter wanted to hold the moment for ever. But no - they had to go down, to the clamour of the crowd which still looked for miracles, and to the Jordan valley road that wound its way south via Jericho to Jerusalem and to the cross.

Thirdly, there is contrast as regards us. In one church there was a couple of fine Christians, yet regarding whom there was one thing that troubled some of their friends. Week by week they did the round of church events - Sunday worship, fellowships here and there, gatherings for a special speaker, evangelistic rallies, prayer meetings, the lot - in this chapel and that chapel. It seemed that they were always trying to live on a spiritual high - to maintain the mountain-top experience. Other Christians longed for them to come down - and get involved in the rough and tumble of the everyday, to share the valley experience where it is dark and difficult to be with Jesus where he is to be found on the margins of life.

That is how it is for the follower of Jesus. Jesus gathered his immediate followers around him, because he, like us, needed them 'to be with him' as Mark recorded it.

But he did not expect them to be sat at his feet, basking in his glory all the time. They had to go out into the world - so he sent them out to gain experience of what it was like to be on their own telling out and living out the good news. The rhythm of the Christian life involves movement, going to and fro. It involves movement between lifting our hands in praise and prayer in worship on the mountain and risking our lives in challenging word and disturbing action in the valley so that the Kingdom of God draws near to the kingdoms of this world.

Here it is that we share in the spiritual experience of worship, enable each other to catch a glimpse of the world beyond this world, but which impinges upon it. We do not fully understand what we experience. But know this, as a mother is required to give of herself for her child out of her love for the child, we who constitute the Church, mother Church as sometimes described, are required to give of ourselves for others, motivated by divine love. We who share the mountain top experience are called to share the valley experience. We who receive are called to give, to go from the glimpse of the glory of God to share in the suffering of God. And to what purpose? - that the rhythm of life will take those who respond to the Son of God through death to life, life that is eternal.