

15th September 2024: Season of Creation 3: Mountain Sunday

One of the things you are warned about when you are learning how to deliver sermons is, don't talk about yourself – or don't talk too much about yourself. If you will forgive me, I am going to break this rule this morning.

When I was about 11 years old, I started bringing myself to this church, St Mary's on the Hill, all by myself. I had just gone to secondary school and one of the routes I could take to school was through the churchyard. As I came through the lychgate something seemed to change. Even the air seemed different. What I did not know then was the history of St Mary's; that people had worshipped on this hill before there was even a Christian presence here. The name Herga, which you see peppered around the Hill – Herga Court flats, Herga House, comes from Old Norse, and Old English and means a pagan temple, altar or a sacred grove. The Harrow boys' house, which is called the Grove, just next door to our church, carries on the trace memory of our history.

Even as an eleven-year-old child, this place called to me and I started coming every week all by myself. Now I know why. Where St Mary stands is what is called in Christian tradition, a "thin" place: somewhere where you feel closer to God. It is a place where people seeking God have always gathered. Why? Because it is a high place, and in every culture and every faith people have always been drawn to high places to worship.

Today, we come to the third of our four Sundays of the Season of Creation. Today's theme is Mountains. Can you remember the experience of being high up on a mountain and what it felt like – the profound silence, the stillness, views stretching away into the distance, the clarity and coolness of the air, a sense perhaps of time stopping still and of a Presence. It is almost impossible not to be struck with awe by the power of such places. Time and again in the bible, God takes people up mountains where they experience a theophany, a meeting with God. Moses, Elijah and, of course, the disciples with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration, all have their lives changed forever by the God-perspective given them on top of a mountain.

Our Old Testament reading speaks of a small mountain, but a mountain that was very important to the people of Israel, Zion, where Jerusalem stood.

The vision we heard in our first reading, from Isaiah, seems very idealised. But to understand it you need to see it in its historical context. The People of Israel had been in exile in Babylon for over 50 years, but had been allowed to return home. What they found was a land devastated by war, and Jerusalem, God's holy city, in ruins. Life was going to be harsh and difficult. Things looked very bleak.

Old Testament prophets often envisioned an ideal future, where God would bring peace and harmony through creation. This was a way of comforting people and giving them hope and something to strive for. The opening lines of our Isaiah reading speak of God "creating new heavens and a new earth." The verb for create here is the same as in Genesis chapter one. God did not create the world a long time ago and then stop. God is creating all the time. God is creating now.

As if to confirm this, I happened to see a programme the evening before I sat down to write this sermon, called "Earth". Perhaps you have seen it? This particular episode showed, from a scientific point of view, how our world is moving, changing and being created all the time. It also showed how closely related the birth of our mountain ranges are to the birth of plant life on this planet. Nothing is certain but new research suggests that at some time in the past, a 3 billion year old asteroid crashed into the earth, splintered the earth's crust and amongst other things, created the tectonic plates on which all our land masses move. Granite was pushed up to create our mountain ranges and the most primitive one cell organisms escaped from the deepest waters where they had been trapped and in due course, inaugurated botanic life on land. It's breathtaking stuff, isn't it? And this movement, this creation, still goes on, as we know. The tectonic plates are moving all the time.

Two elements in Isaiah's prophecy invite special attention - the mountain of God and the image of peace. The holy mountain is the term used to describe the place where God dwells. For the People of Israel this mountain was Mount Zion. It was the sacred place where God chose to be present in a special way.

In verses 18-19, the promise of God is that Jerusalem, also known as Mount Zion, is still the place from which God's creating power radiates. Not only that but it is the source of God's presence. God will rejoice in the holy mountain together with his people who worship on that mountain.

The final image of peace on that mountain is similar to the scene we hear in the Advent reading of Isaiah 11.6-7 where 'the wolf and the lamb' lie down together. In both passages, wild creatures live at peace with weaker creatures. Lions and oxen are found eating straw. And the snake eats dust, not live animals. The key point of the imagery is in the last line: 'They shall not hurt or destroy in my holy mountain' (Isa. 65.25). The world of God's holy mountain will be transformed into one of peace between all creatures that once hunted each other. This mountain is 'peace mountain'. Or, as my husband, the eternal punster, put it, "Ever-rest."

All of this seems such good news. We look upon mountains as immovable, parts of our world that we can depend on, that will always be there. But today even our mountains are in crisis due to the damage we, humans cause. Some of the damage comes from tourism. We want to enjoy nature but how can we do it sensitively and carefully?

Most of our water comes to us from mountains. So, what happens when we pollute our water sources? The Ok Tedi mine located high in the rain forest in the Star Mountains of Papua New Guinea shows us what happens. This is one of the largest gold and copper mines in the world. But from these mines have flowed tailings (waste) that are full of toxins and sediment that have polluted the rivers, killed the fish, smothered vegetation and impoverished the people. From this mountain and many others, poisonous power rather than rich renewal has flowed. Mining activities have turned the mountain into a symbol of human greed and destruction.

The mining continues. Copper and lead are a necessary part of our lives. But abuse of the wild does not have to be a daily event. It need not be like this. The main way to clean up this type of pollution is to capture the metals in mine water treatment schemes before they can enter rivers. Many, many responsible companies do this. But others do not.

So, briefly, to our gospel from Mark.

This is not a text that many of us know well. It may seem familiar because we are more used to reading it in Matthew's gospel. Jesus takes his disciples up a mountain just before his ascension and gives them what is called the Great Commission – to go out into the world and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. We read the version found in Mark, partly because we are in the year of Mark but mainly because the commission here has a slightly different emphasis. Here Jesus asks his disciples to proclaim the Gospel, the Good News about God's love to 'the whole creation.'

The original word here is the physical creation—sun, sky, Earth and all creatures of our God and King. In other words, the gospel of love is not only for the redemption of human beings but for all creation. This creation, abused and broken by human sin, is also the object of God's healing, loving care. And God, through his creation gives back and back to us.

Most of us have vivid memories of mountains to hold onto forever and ultimately, in the bible, the mountain, too, celebrates. As a wonderful Christian song based on Psalm 55 puts it,

You shall go out with joy, and be led forth with peace"
"The mountains and the hills shall break forth before you"
"There'll be shouts of joy"
"And all the trees of the field shall clap, shall clap their hands."

Thank God for mountains and high places.