

Sermons at the All Saints Anglican Church of Luxembourg

Preached by Rev Alison Heal on Sunday 2nd March 2025

Bible passage: Exodus 34, 29-end and Luke 9, 28-36

You know the concept of a ‘mountain-top experience’? It comes from Jewish and Christian culture, and it comes, of course, from the two stories M. and V. have just read for us. The great Jewish prophet Moses went up the mountain twice, and he spoke with God – this was when God was giving him the 10 Commandments. We just revised some of them, this morning. In an episode which deliberately echoes the Moses story, Jesus went up on the mountain to pray, but instead of a solitary experience, he took some of his friends with him to this meeting with God.

Let’s start with a look at Moses. The key Old Testament story, which M. read, tells us that after Moses spoke to God, the skin of his face was shining. I guess we can imagine why that might be. The picture I’ve used to illustrate our service today shows us this radiant little girl, beaming as her mother kisses her. Listen to those words I’ve used – radiant, beaming – we use these words of light to describe a happiness which seems almost transcendent. And why is this little girl’s face shining? Let’s be realistic. It’s partially because the photographer has posed her under a huge great lamp. But we know, and we know this emotionally as well as factually, that her face is shining because she’s experiencing a moment of great joy, in the safety of her mother’s embrace.



So it seems logical to assume that Moses, after spending this transcendent time meeting face to face with God, has returned down the mountain glowing with the joy and security of God’s

presence. We can also presume that something of God's glory has 'rubbed-off' on him – he somehow seems more than human, and this scares the Israelites, so he goes to put on a veil. Think back those words about veils which we used as our prayer of preparation, from Paul's letter to the Corinthians. St Paul is quite sceptical about Moses' veil. He tells us that Moses kept the veil on because the shining glory *faded* from his face between each meeting with God, and Moses didn't want the Israelites to know he wasn't shiny all of the time.

Hmm. Cynical of St Paul, but it probably matches with what we know of ourselves. We want to keep the mountain-top feeling, and we want to present a shining face to the world, no matter what's actually going on in our lives, or in the world.

Pause

Now, moving on to V's reading from the Gospel of Luke, we find Jesus going up the mountain not alone, but with his friends, because he needs them to witness something extraordinary – Moses, who we mentioned already, and Elijah, the other great prophet, are there in glory, talking to Jesus. Jesus also looks glorious, it's like a glimpse of how he is in his divinity, not his humanity – Luke doesn't actually say his face is shining, but it has changed somehow, and his clothes are dazzling. Evidently, Moses and Elijah had been dead for hundreds of years by this point, so the disciples know they're seeing some kind of heavenly vision, and they try to make the best sense of it that they can. But they're not really expected to make sense of it, yet, they're just there to experience, and listen. God *needed* those disciples to see Jesus glorified, safe in his Father's embrace, if you like, and God needed them to hear His voice, once again confirming Jesus as his Son.

How did the disciples get to this point of revelation? They followed Jesus up the mountain, they prayed with him there, they experienced what happened to him, and they listened. Follow, pray, experience, listen. Quite useful advice for our daily lives, too. Think about what J. has been telling us about what he'll be doing 'This Time Tomorrow': we've prayed for him preparing for that exam. For each person here, we can spend tomorrow following Jesus where he takes us, praying with him there, then experiencing whatever he has for us to experience, and listening to his voice. Sunday mornings may feel like the mountain top of our week (or they may absolutely not), but taking this model into our *seven days a week* is what makes the difference. Follow, pray, experience and listen to him.

Pause

But let's face reality. Talking about a shiny-faced prophet and our transfigured Lord Jesus may seem slightly irrelevant right now. Thinking about mountain-top experiences may seem like avoidance of what's in the news, what's going on in the world out there. Singing 'Jesus living in me can change the world' may sound trite and naive, a little ditty to please the children. This week we've seen kidnapped babies dead, in debated circumstances. We've seen babies in that same Holy Land die preventable deaths from the cold. We've seen innocent civilians, and faithful leaders, blamed and attacked for wars they never started. We've seen wrong called right, we've seen politics and diplomacy turned into harassment and bullying on live TV. Shall we just hide our heads in our prayers and try to weather this storm? Is that what turning to Jesus in his glory means right now? Avoiding reality? Refusing to step up and name evil when we see it?

Wow. When I wrote those two phrases: 'Turning to Jesus in his glory' and 'refusing to step up and name evil when we see it', I realised *they can't go together*. If our faith, our religious practice, turns into an avoidance tactic, then we are not having any kind of genuine close encounter with

God. The shining faces of Moses and Jesus went back down the mountain and straight out into real (and messy) life again. The more we see the wonder of God through the death and resurrection of Jesus, the more we are filled with his Spirit, the more we must see the reality of how God needs us to act in the world. The Holy Spirit isn't an anaesthetic, but a spirit of Truth.

But watch what I'm saying here. It's not a case of 'see the evil, rush out and face it'. It's a case of 'turn to Jesus, go up the mountain to be transformed in him, *go out in his grace* to see the evil and face it *in his name*'. It's too easy for us to swing one way or the other. 'I want my faith to dull me into inaction' and 'I want my faith to justify my actions' are both traps we can easily fall into. Folks, we cannot do this on our own.

Although it doesn't appear in any of his books, many people attribute this quote to Dietrich Bonhoeffer: "Silence in the face of evil is itself evil: God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act." Bonhoeffer, who with Martin Luther King is an increasingly important influence for our own times, was executed in Nazi Germany. He certainly acted. But in his letters from prison we see how he based this call to action on a constant seeking after Jesus. While he was imprisoned he wrote:

"Lord Jesus Christ,
You were poor
And in distress, a captive and forsaken as I am.
You know all man's troubles;
You abide with me
When all men fail me;
You remember and seek me;
It is Your will that I should know You
And turn to You.
Lord, I hear Your call and *follow*;
Help me."

It was this continual turning back to Jesus, being filled with the Spirit of God, which made Bonhoeffer a global influence on moral and ethical behaviour. It's the same for Martin Luther King.

Like you, probably, my news and my social media is full of disgusted people, rightly furious at the behaviour of governments and world leaders. What can I, what can you, as followers of Jesus, contribute, if I'm not to be more than another angry, unheard voice?

I can follow Jesus. I can pray. I can experience what he does (that will be through studying my Bible) and I can listen (that will be through *forcing* out some time in my day to listen in meditative or contemplative prayer, and I do mean forcing). Follow, pray, experience, listen. What does St Paul promise us, as we do this, allowing God's Holy Spirit to free us? He states that we 'with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image'.

Wow. As I spend time with Jesus, as you spend time with Jesus, as we are filled with God's Holy Spirit, some of that God-stuff is rubbing off on us! Just as Moses had that shiny face *whenever he'd spoken with God*, we become more like God as we spend time with him. Just like Moses lost the shine when he'd been absent from God for a while... well you see how it goes.

We're looking at a world where there are real battles going on. Some of them are battles in war, some of them are battles in words, for the moment at least. For many people around the world it's just a battle to survive. How are we to be active in challenging, serving, speaking up, opposing? God is calling us here in All Saints to different ways of doing this, different members to different aspects of his cause. But he's not calling any of us to go it alone, separating our faith in him from our horror at what we see. Neither is he calling us to use our faith in him as a gloss, a justification, to act. He is calling us, perhaps more than ever, to follow, to pray, to experience him, to listen to him, and then, in the power of his Spirit, to act.

Let's bow our heads and pray:

Lord of glory, when I come to you, you change me. As I walk away from you, your loving glow fades. In my week, in this world, I need to take your love with me. Teach me to hold onto you, follow you into my everyday world. Teach me to pray to you, in my emotions, in my watching the news, in my work life. Teach me to experience you, not just on Sundays, but in time creatively carved out of everyday life. Teach me to listen to you, stilling the voices of the internet, the news, the crowds, my own mind, my friends and family. Then teach me to walk on out, to live and act and love, in the power of your Spirit.