

Thoughts on Mountains

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On holiday recently I met Dimitris. He's around 60 years old, almost spherical, largely gruff but with a twinkle in his eye. He works at the Boukari Taverna in Corfu. Every morning his job is to set the tables for the lunchtime service; there are around 25 tables and they're all outside under a veranda at the edge of the Ionian Sea. Dimitris puts some music on and goes about his business methodically: 'How you doing this morning Dimitris?' I ask him, he points in the general direction of the mountains, taking in the the calm blue sea and the spiral of white cloud in the otherwise clear sky; he gives a little skip and says 'Ooo-pah!' This I translate as 'How do you think I'm doing, you daft tourist?! I'm laying the flippin' tables again but at least I'm doing it in the company of these glorious mountains...!'

I spent a fair bit of time considering the same mountains and a result I'd like to offer you this morning not a beginning, middle and an end talk, but more an album of 11 tracks or thoughts inspired by various mountains.

1. Ain't No Mountain High Enough

There have been many arguments down through the years as to what constitutes a mountain, when does a hill become a

mountain? Is a Mount really a hill? There's even been a film about an English man going up a hill and coming back down a mountain. For the purposes of this morning, this judge's decision is final. And your personal decision is also final. If it feels to you like a mountain - it is, the same with a hill. Some days a hill can feel like a mountain and other days a mountain can feel like a hill.

2. Gold In Them Hills

The highest point in central London is understood to be Parliament Hill on Hampstead Heath, that's about 4 kilometres walk from this church. Parliament Hill was acquired for the people by the Metropolitan Board of Works in 1888 for the sum of £300,000. Without this wise intervention we probably wouldn't be able to walk up there to see the view of the city rolled out beneath us. The Metropolitan Board of Works was set up to help London through the chaos of rapid growth as a city.

Sir John Thwaites was the first chairman of the board. He was a Strict Baptist, a church warden, deacon and a preacher. He was responsible for getting the construction of London's sewerage system underway. Sir John also supported the Early Closing Movement for shop workers – so they didn't have to work all the hours God sent. He was known for being rather formal – other board members called him 'The Stiff Un'. He wasn't a

Londoner, he grew up on a farm surrounded by the peaks of the Lake District. I'm 94% certain that Sir John's early experience of those high points meant that he knew London's Parliament Hill had to be kept for the use of ordinary folks. Everyone should have access to high points.

3. Go Tell It On The Mountain

The many people who wrote the bible lived amongst mountains, and unsurprisingly their stories are illustrated by the high points around them. Noah's ark comes to rest on Mount Ararat, Moses is confronted with the burning bush on Mount Sinai, then he first sees the Promised Land of Milk and Honey from Mount Nebo and Abraham climbs Mount Moriah to sacrifice his son. Mountains are where important stuff happens. In the bible you rarely climb up a mountain and nothing happens.

4. Falling – the theme from Twin peaks

There were two very important mountains in early Jewish history; they were called Gerizim and Ebal. Gerizim was lush and fertile and called the Mountain of Blessings and Ebal was rocky and known as the Mountain of Curses. There's a point in the book of Deuteronomy and in the Jewish Talmud where the tribes of Israel are gathered at the foothills of these mountains; they must turn to face Ebal as a list of bad behaviour that will incur the wrath of God is read out: idolatry, bribery, murder - that sort of thing; they then face Gerizim for the rules of good

behaviour that will invite God's blessing. After each rule all people were expected to show their agreement by saying Amen. Scholars of the Jewish faith see this as the moment when the rule of law was acknowledged together by the people – and the mountains were a huge, uncompromising symbol of their assenting Amens.

5. River Deep, Mountain High

Jesus has his own mount of blessings too, Mount Eremos or the Mount of the Beatitudes – that's where we hear him preach 'Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God. Blessed are the peace makers for they shall be called children of God...' We've moved on a bit by this New Testament time as Jesus doesn't balance it out by moving to another mountain for a list of curses. 'Cursed are the impure in heart for they shan't see God' is not something Jesus feels the need to say. There's another lovely moment in the New Testament where Jesus must be preaching in the open air and he uses a mountain as a living illustration of his thinking. He says 'Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.' Imagine being a follower of Jesus being able to remember his teachings by walking through the landscape 'Yep that's the place of blessings, and that's the big one that

reminds me I can do pretty much anything if I set my faithful mind to it’.

6. A Deal With God

For Jesus mountains are where he experiences one of the lowest points of his life and then the absolute heights. The Mount of Olives – one of three high points on a ridge overlooking Old Jerusalem – is where he wrestles in prayer with his Heavenly Father over his forthcoming death. Another unnamed mountain is where his Transfiguration and return to that Heavenly Father takes place later in the story. Even to a contemporary Christian, who tends to believe that God is everywhere, it is very hard to let go of the notion, the higher you go, the closer you are to God. Nan Shepherd, a pioneering Scottish poet and mountaineer, describes the transfiguring power of mountains in the book she wrote in the 1930s – *The Living Mountain*. In it she writes about repeated visits to her beloved Cairngorms ‘It is an experience that grows; undistinguished days add their part, and now and then, unpredictable and unforgettable, come the hours when heaven and earth fall away and one sees a new creation. The many details — a stroke here, a stroke there — come for a moment into perfect focus, and one can read at last the word that has been from the beginning.

7. She’ll be coming round the mountain

I suspect our congregation divides into people who’ve sung this

on a coach trip and those who are wondering what on earth I'm on about. This song has its origins in a spiritual called When The Chariot Comes, first published in the Old Plantation Hymnbook in 1899. It's all about the Second Coming of Jesus and the 'she' coming round the mountain is the chariot he's driving. According to the hymn this is the moment of The Rapture when he will all gather us all up and take us to heaven – no surprises that this will happen on a mountain.

8. Climb Every Mountain

I have a few issues with Rodgers and Hammerstein and this number from the Sound of Music. I don't think it's necessary to climb every mountain, or indeed any mountain, if that's not your thing. They can be scary, dangerous and should definitely not be attempted unless you have had some sort of training and are properly equipped. I grew up hearing about tourists in flip flops being rescued from Welsh mountain tops. I think that explains why the highest peak in my home country; Yr Wyddfa, or Snowdon, is, as yet, untroubled by me. But looking at it from afar brings me a great deal of comfort, it's part of the landscape of my life. Neither is Yr Wyddfa immutable and unchanging, as Nan Shepherd says, the mountain changes all the time as season and weather shadow and light it a hundred different ways. Merely watching mountains is an emotional business – you don't have to climb them for perspective and challenge.

9. King of the Mountain

The other thing that changes a mountain every time is us – regardless of whether we're contemplating their magnificence from the ground or making a climb. We're always bringing a different self to those high places. We can be more or less energetic, ready for a challenge, or seeking comfort, wanting to pray or shout to hear our voices echo down the valley. They can terrify us as their looming constancy reminds us how small and inconsequential we are and delight us for exactly the same reason; mountains can push us on to achieve our goals and other times they bring us home.

10. Running up that hill

My favourite mountain is Y Gogarth or the Great Orme – a headland off Llandudno, in North Wales. It's about a 9 kilometre run from the door of my dad's place, round the Orme and home again. The first half is almost entirely up hill, and it's a steep old tormentor of a hill. My challenge is to keep trotting up to the half-way point, marked by a tearoom called The Rest And Be Thankful. I bet you're thinking 'That sounds like a delightful place'. It isn't. You can't rely on it to ever be open and when it is you are served by the most unsettling couple of all time. Straight out of a Stephen King novel. I have learnt never to rest there but to push on through and enjoy the downhill bit. That's when my rush of thankfulness arrives.

11. Homeward Bound

I'll finish with something special from the Maori people of New Zealand or Aotearoa – the land of the long white cloud. They have a very special way of doing introductions called a Pepeha. It's a kind of conversation template which is intended to place you in the land and provide something of your origin story for new people you meet: you give your name, the mountain that speaks to your heart, the river or lake that eases your worries, then your tribe and your meeting house.

So I'd be Rhian, my mountain would be the Y Gogarth, Llyn Geirionydd would be my lake, I come from the tribe of Roberts, and St Luke's, West Holloway is my meeting house. There's a project in New Zealand to encourage non-Maori people to adopt this form of introduction in a respectful way. It feels a whole lot more nuanced and helpful than 'Where are you from?' or 'What do you do?'

I was wondering if Jesus would say the Mount of Olives spoke to his heart and the Sea of Galilee eased his worries. He would trace his human ancestry to the Tribe of Judah and we could have a long conversation as to what his meeting house might be. If I ask you 'which mountain speaks to your heart?' You might know the answer straight away or you might have yet to find a mountain of your own - maybe you have a few to choose from and you're not quite ready to settle on your favourite.

One day there will be a place you watch or climb, where your eyes rest or your heart pounds, a mountain that blesses you and makes you think of heaven, majestically challenges you or brings you home.