

Last time I wrote about sitting quietly by the river and now I've turned to majestic mountains. We are very fortunate to live near some fantastic hills and many of you will have walked up Helvellyn or Great Gable, Simonside or Cheviot, admired spectacular views and experienced those breath taking moments no words can adequately describe.

On a personal note I feel incredibly privileged to have enjoyed several mountain "moments" forever etched on my mind. The first of these was climbing the mountain which towered behind my grandparents' house in South Wales. As a young girl on holiday I loved that sense of freedom, a release and escape from London suburbia and school – collecting whinberries, hiding in tall ferns, picking heather for my grandmother, catching grasshoppers and gazing down on rows of pit houses from the top. Happy times! Later in life, travelling 14,000 feet into the foothills of the Andes, revelling in the sheer enormity and power of the landscape and watching eagles soar majestically around us. Seeing the summit of Mont Blanc emerge from the mist, gazing wondrously at the red glow of Uluru in the midday sun and stepping onto glaciers in Iceland. Truly magical moments in time. Moments that send a tingle down your spine!

Many people are moved by mountains, their splendour, their biodiversity and their beauty whether religious or not. Many enjoy the physical challenges of mountaineering whilst others love the feeling of freedom, of leaving everyday problems behind, remoteness or simply the stunning views and scenery. It is really no surprise how different peoples and religions have turned neighbouring mountains into sacred sites going back centuries. At the base of Mount Everest for instance is the famous Rongbuk monastery, a place of pilgrimage for the Sherpa people. The Aboriginal people believe that ancient spirits reside at Uluru and ceremonies have taken place there for centuries. Mount Fuji in Japan is a sacred Buddhist site where pilgrims go to worship and so on.

Mountains are mentioned frequently in the Bible, apparently over 500 times. They were seen to be places which were closer to God, symbols of His great strength and power reflecting the beauty of His Creation. In the Old Testament the most significant mountains were Mount Sinai (Mount Horeb) and Mount Zion further south. Moses received the gift of the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. Moses went to the top of the mountain to meet with God

Exodus 24 v 16-18

"The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights"

Mount Zion was in the area captured by David which later became the location for Solomon's Temple.

Then there was Mount Ararat at nearly 16,845 feet where Noah's Ark came to rest after the flood. Elijah called on God on Mount Carmel challenging the false prophets of Baal. Then again while escaping from Queen Jezebel he encountered God on Mount Horeb, not in the earthquake or fire but in a "sound of sheer silence" We read in the Bible "When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave" This experience changed him. His knowledge of God deepened and he returned to life as a prophet after encountering God in such an unexpected way.

In the New Testament there are many other equally compelling and dramatic mountain events especially in Matthew. For instance the Sermon on the Mount, the Transfiguration and the commissioning of the disciples. They all happened on mountains.

As well as these very significant events however we are told in the Bible that Jesus used to go alone onto the mountains to be with God in a tranquil place away from everyone to listen to God. These were such precious and vital moments for Jesus.

Matthew 14 v 23

“And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone”

Luke 6 v 12

“ In these days he went out to the mountain to pray and all night he continued in prayer to God”

Back to present times. There have been plenty of things written about the sacred nature of mountains, how they have been regarded by many as the Axis Mundi – places where heaven and earth meet . People can experience a “bigness outside yourself” (Wallace Stegner) .

Nan Shepherd, an avid Aberdonian hill walker, wrote in her book the Living Mountain that in her hill walking she found “the still centre of being “ and that “It is a journey into Being, for as I penetrate more deeply into the mountain’s life, I penetrate more deeply into my own” I am positive she will not be alone in those sentiments.

Sometimes people will do anything for their faith and live in what we would consider really extreme conditions – on mountains or cliff faces. One such example is Mount Athos, one of the most important centres of the Orthodox Christian world. Situated on the Greek peninsula it consists of 20 monasteries and about 2000 monks. Some live in the monasteries, others are in isolation living on the remote south side called Karoulia, in sketes. These can only be described as very small cells literally hanging on the cliff edge, hundreds of feet up. The monks have to haul themselves up by a system of ropes and pulleys with food arriving in baskets suspended from ropes. The monks regard it as a sacred place of peace, solace, tranquillity and deep thought . One monk who was giving a rare interview said that Mount Athos has a “mystical character”. It is one of the oldest surviving monastic communities on earth dating back to the ninth century. No women are allowed within 500 metres of the shore; there are no female animals even. The monks come from all over the world for the beauty, the peace and the prayer. They literally never stop praying; their main goal is to get closer to God and escape all worldly trappings and distractions. There are no radios or televisions, no newspapers just a few telephones. By all accounts, despite their perilous living conditions the monks are in good health – no cancer or Alzheimer’s- and they drink wine at 9am ! – they are self-sufficient, growing their own produce over the 130 square mile peninsula . Many have lived there for decades – there are some amazing pictures on you tube. Their depth of devotion is truly astounding – they pray as St Paul commanded - unceasingly – even while talking – some likened it to breathing itself – aiming to move closer to Christ every day. Services are eight hours long every single day of the year, no musical instruments only chanting. One journalist remarked that it is harder to get a place here than Harvard! There is no shortage of applicants.

Another fascinating Orthodox monastery is at the foot of Mount Horeb, St Catherine's, founded in the sixth century . A chapel lies over the roots of the descendant of the burning bush. It is considered to be a very holy place indeed – where God spoke to his people for the first time through Moses. The Rubus Sanctus bush on the site is venerated and it's said that any attempt to take cuttings and plant it elsewhere will fail. Egeria, a fourth century female pilgrim from Spain , described in a letter how she spent the night here. A church already existed on this site with a water supply. The monastery contains thousands of beautiful icons and ancient manuscripts. Many visitors claim to have experienced extraordinary spiritual feelings there quite apart from wondering at the natural beauty of the place.

I believe that God's love for each and every one of us is as solid as the mountains, as dependable, as immovable and as beautiful. As much as it would be glorious to meditate or pray on a summit somewhere you may be as relieved as I am that there is no need to reach for the climbing ropes or ice picks or to scramble up scree slopes. What is in our hearts is the crucial thing , our faith and trust in the Lord , our willingness to be quiet and to listen to Him – and that could be in our living rooms and gardens, anywhere at all for He is always with us and loving us.

Psalms 121 1;2

"I lift my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth"

Isaiah's prophecy about the Kingdom of Heaven Isaiah chp 2 v 2-3

In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it.

Many peoples shall come and say. " Come, let us go up to the mountain of the lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths" For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem

The Mountain a prayer of security David Cole

As a mountain is firm beneath my feet

So you, Lord, are a firm foundation

My soul can rest in the security of you.

As the mountain goat finds surety

In the mountain beneath its foot

So I find surety in you

You alone are my life's foundation.

On nothing else do I trust my foot to fall.

On nothing else do I establish my life. Nothing is as secure as you. My Lord, My God. My rock.