

A couple of weeks ago while sat on my garden seat taking yet another rest from weeding and barrowing I became aware of the most beautiful clouds , poetry in motion, drifting across the sky. That was the finish of gardening as I spent the next half hour gazing heavenwards , silently praising God for his Creation and marvelling at their ephemeral beauty. Clouds are fascinating, rather mysterious and quite beautiful. We have all probably gazed up at them imagining faces and different shapes which appear fleetingly and then disappear as if by magic. We have seen those striking moments as rays of light streak down through the clouds like a coronet or we have looked down on their fluffy, cotton wool tops from a plane. Our moods can be dampened on a summers day by those ominous dark thunder clouds or lifted by the sight of wispy and ethereal low cloud nestling in the valleys

Clouds crop up in well known phrases –“ someone living in cloud cuckoo land” ,” head in the clouds”, “ every cloud has a silver lining” and” dark cloud on the horizon” to mention but a few.

Nephology apparently means the study of clouds and a nephophile is someone obsessed or very fond of clouds . The Met Office has fascinating information about them on line . The earth’s atmosphere is a very cloudy place with NASA’s earth observatory estimating that at any given time about 67% of the earth’s surface is covered by cloud.

There is a Cloud Appreciation Society, founded in 2005 by Gavin Pretor- Pinney which has thousands of members and a manifesto which includes this phrase “ We believe that clouds are for dreamers and their contemplation benefits the soul” I was reminded of St Cuthbert who retreated to Inner Farne in search of solitude, somewhere where he could be absolutely alone with God and spend time in prayer and contemplation. People came from miles to visit him even in that remote place , seeking his wisdom and healing. He built a turf and stone enclosure with a beehive shape cell inside , sunk well down so he had to look upwards to see the light and not be distracted by worldly matters. David Adam writes “ Here the veil between heaven and earth would be drawn aside. Here he would seek to know the God who is ever present and in our midst” There was a corner inside for him to celebrate Holy Communion. I wonder how many wondrous and celestial clouds St Cuthbert gazed upon as he looked upwards out of his cell ! This solitude, this time of peace and calm were so vital for his work and for renewing his energy.

I began thinking about clouds and the Bible. Somehow clouds here are not just to do with the weather. They seem to be used to signify the glory and the presence of God at particular times. They are mentioned on so many really significant occasions in both the Old and the New Testament that it has made me think there may be much, much more to clouds than actually meets the eye, that even around the darkest most ominous looking cloud there is only cause to celebrate !

God said to Noah for example In Genesis chp 9 v 13 – 16

I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.  
“When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant  
...and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh”

Can you remember how we remarked during lockdown how many rainbows had been seen over the Tyne Valley?

God led his people out of Egypt with a pillar of cloud which shielded them from the scorching sun and hid them from their enemies. We read about this in Exodus . His people would be reassured of God’s presence on their journey at the same time having to trust Him as they couldn’t see through the cloud or know exactly where they were going .

A bit later on in Exodus we read how Moses went up Mount Sinai “ and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; and the seventh day he called Moses out of the cloud”

The pillar of cloud also descended on the tabernacle and when the cloud rose the Israelites would continue on their journey. Exodus 40 v 37 “but if the cloud was not taken up , then they did not set out until the day that it was taken up”

In the New Testament there is the Transfiguration . Jesus had taken Peter, John and James up the mountain to pray. They saw his face and clothes change and then Moses and Elijah appeared. When Peter spoke a cloud came down and overshadowed them Luke chp 9 v 34 -36 “they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said , “ This is my Son, my Chosen, listen to him! “ Peter reflected on this years later 2 Peter chp 1 v 18 “ We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain”

Clouds were there at Christ’s Ascension Acts 1 v v 9 -11

“ As they were watching , he was lifted up , and a cloud took him out of their sight....This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven ,will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven”

We hear this again in Revelations chp 1 v 7 “ Look ! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those that pierced him”

As I gaze at clouds now I think about these passages in the Bible, I think about God’s gift of Creation, His continual presence with us and the beauty all around us if only we have a mind to look – and that includes upwards !

“ THE CLOUD “            by Percy Bysshe Shelley ( 1792 – 1822 )

I am the daughter of Earth and Water,  
And the nursling of the sky;  
I pass through the pores of the ocean and shores;  
I change, but I cannot die,  
For after the rain, when with never a stain  
The pavilion of Heaven is bare,  
And the winds and the sunbeams, with their convex  
gleams  
Build up the blue dome of Air,  
I silently laugh at my own cenotaph  
And out of the caverns of rain,  
Like a child from the womb, like a ghost from the tomb,  
I arise, and unbuild it again “

Alleluia !