

Mountains and encounters with God, All Saints' Evening Prayer, 14 March 2021, 'On the other side of the mountain'

Are you familiar with the song '*She'll be coming round the mountain when she comes*'? It's catchy, repetitive, and probably comes from early American railway workers. Also possibly, apparently, it's based on a church song, a spiritual, referring to Easter and the Resurrection. Either way, there's something about the mountain hiding an important arrival. We know it's coming, but we can't yet see it. We know it's going to be exciting, every time.

In our Evening Prayer services during Lent 2021, we are considering mountains and encounters with God. We've heard about some great men of the Old Testament, Abraham and Isaac and Moses and next week will be about Elijah. But because today is Mothering Sunday I'm focussing on one woman in the New Testament, Martha. She, her sister Mary and brother Lazarus were close friends of Jesus who visited them often for rest, care and good company. They lived in Bethany, on the 'other side' of The Mount of Olives which is itself across the valley from Mount Zion. The two Psalms for tonight echo that 'mountain' and 'valley' context.

In tonight's Gospel reading, Lazarus has died and has not yet been brought back to life by Jesus. Nonetheless, Martha has an astounding insight about the Resurrection of Jesus as the long awaited Christ, the Messiah. Martha understands it independently of the male disciples. That's why this passage from John's Gospel is so exciting. It balances out that other image of Martha in Luke's Gospel (ch.10) as the frustrated, busy housekeeping sister. It's never a good idea to fix on stereotypes in the Bible! I know from living and working with the Society of Mary and Martha at Sheldon in the hills of Devon that Mary and Martha roles are many and varied.

Today if you visit Israel, you can't go directly between Bethany and Jerusalem. The 7 metre (21 ft) high Security Wall is in the way. It's not a mountain but it might as well be, separating people and different faith communities. That distance of two miles is a complicated journey. The town named Bethany in the Greek of the Bible is known locally as Al Azariya 'the place of Lazarus' in Arabic. Palestinian Christians, Arabic speaking, live there. Just as in Roman times, military rules apply.

So, yes, Easter is '*coming round the mountain when she comes*' and we are still in Lent, waiting with anticipation. For us too, it is quite a journey to the other side of the mountain, to Jerusalem, Holy Week and Easter. It is quite possible, and normal, to take a lifetime to get there, learning all the time, going up and down metaphorical mountains. But won't it be wonderful to be like Martha in John's Gospel and reach that level of belief?

Alison Wedgbury, LLM