

Mountains and encounters with God, All Saints' Evening Prayer, 21.2.21

In our Evening Prayer services during Lent 2021, we will be considering mountains and encounters with God. Both the Old and New Testaments give us some fascinating examples and we've chosen just a few. It's fair to say that over the centuries many ancient world belief systems have tended to associate mountains with the divine presence. In China, Japan, South America, Greece, Italy, Mesopotamia and also for the indigenous peoples of Australia, gods have been located at height. In all three monotheistic Abrahamic faiths, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, there are accounts of encounters on mountains with the one true God. In the Old Testament, we hear about Noah's Ark and Mt Ararat, Abraham and Isaac on Mt Moriah, Moses on Mt Horeb or Sinai in Egypt and later on Mt Nebo in Jordan, Elijah on Mt Carmel, the Samaritan focus on Mt Gerazim and of course the city of David, Jerusalem, on Mt Zion. In the story of Israel, the mountains and fertile valleys of the Promised Land often contrast favourably with the shame and pain of exile, both in the lowlands of the Nile Delta in Egypt and in the flat plains of Babylon.

In the New Testament, Jesus went up to mountains for prayer, to be tempted by Satan, to preach and for his Transfiguration and Ascension. In the early years of Christianity, hermits and monastics often chose to live on remote mountains to be nearer to God. Today on Mt Athos in Greece, some 2000 monks continue to live in various small cells or monasteries. Also, Benedictine nuns continue to live and pray for the world on another 'holy hill', Mt Montserrat in Spain, until recently accessible mainly by cable car.

In geological terms, a mountain is a 'natural upward projection of the earth's surface, more than 600m above the surrounding land'. It has steep slopes, a narrow summit and rocky surface. It's no coincidence that in Psalm 95, read to us this evening, one metaphor for God is the 'rock' of salvation. Also, apparently in ancient Jewish belief about God's Creation, mountains were rooted at an equal depth below the earth. That could explain verse 4 in Psalm 95: *In his hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also.*

So what hope is there for us in the Fen Edge landscape, with not even any hills, let alone mountains? Fortunately, Psalm 95 comes to the rescue again: *The sea is his, for he made it, and the dry land, which his hands have formed.* We have ever-changing rivers and lodes and even flooded fields that attracted over 400 Whooper Swans this year. We have mysterious and awe-inspiring skies, sunrises, sunsets and clouds. To coin a phrase, the Fen Edge is indeed 'God's own country'. God made it. We really can encounter God here any time, without travelling to find mountains.

Alison Wedgbury, LLM