

In her talk introducing this series of evening prayer talks, Alison spoke of how mountains have long since been associated with a divine presence, not just in Christianity but in other belief systems as well. This evening I would like to pick up on that idea of being in God's presence. Last week, Cheryl told us how God told Abraham that through him all the nations of the earth would be blessed. And we know that God fulfilled that promise through Jesus Christ many hundreds of years later. Restoring his blessings on the nations included restoring the relationship between God and the people of Israel and access to his presence.

If we turn our minds back to Genesis and the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve had full access to God and lived in a close relationship with him. But they rebelled and the relationship was fractured. Access to God's presence was lost. God had a reason for rescuing the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. And now at the foot of Mount Sinai, he was ready to tell them what that was. God gave a unique invitation to Moses to take back to the people: he invited them to become his own special treasure from among all the people on earth, to become his kingdom of priests, God's holy nation. God invited the Israelites to enter into a relationship with him, thus restoring the access to his presence that was lost with the fall of Eden. God asked one thing of the people in return: that they obey him and live by His law. But even though the people agreed, it did not take them long to turn away from God again and the way God had instructed them to live.

All through the Old Testament, we see time and time again a process whereby God sends his people into exile because they cannot live according to his laws. And each time, after a period has passed, we see that God sends someone who liberates all of Israel to return to the Promised Land. We see it in Isaiah with King Cyrus. Lynda's sermon this morning highlights another example, with Daniel and King Darius. The people of Israel find it a constant battle to live according to God's law. Why then did God choose Israel to be his nation, his 'special treasure'? And why did he want to have a special nation on earth? He chose them, not so much because of what they had done, but in spite of it, showing his love and his mercy. And he chose them because he wanted them to represent his way of life on earth, to teach his word and to be an agent of salvation to world. Through the nation of Israel, Kings and Gentiles would be brought to the Lord, just as with the Kings under which Daniel was a slave. And through the nation of Israel, Jesus Christ would be born. God chose this one special nation. He put it through a rigorous process of testing so that one day it could be a channel for his blessings to the whole world.

What about our lives today? Do we find it difficult to stay in God's presence? It is God's deepest wish for us to be in a close relationship with him. It is why he sent us his son: so that we would have everlasting access to God's presence. But like the people of Israel in the times of the Old Testament, how hard this seems to be sometimes? How easy it is to be distracted by worldly pursuits and distractions. We might even ask why God would want us to be in a relationship with him if we find it so hard. The answer is simple: God is merciful, God is forgiving and he loves us. He loves us so much that he sent Jesus to live among us and die on the cross for us. Let us all show our love for him trying just a little harder to stay in his presence, remembering that he wants this so much that he is willing to help us do it. All you have to do is ask.