

Would you say you have had an encounter with God?

The one Peter, James and John had on the mountain top was startling, and the one St. Paul had on the road to Damascus was equally dramatic.

I can't say I've ever encountered God like that besides which "mountain top experiences" like the transfiguration or the time Moses met with God on Mount Sinai are rare. It's a glimpse of God, a brief moment with God that shapes and influences the rest of life lived down in the valley.

St. Peter wants to build a shelter to extend this remarkable experience but it was an irrelevant suggestion, a mountain top moment with God is not a permanent experience but a formative moment that changes everything else.

How we encounter God and when we encounter God isn't something we can manipulate, Peter James and John were taken up the mountain, the other nine disciples were not.

That doesn't mean we can't seek God or desire to be in his presence. Jane spoke very personally a few weeks back of being desperate to hear from God as she was at a really difficult place in her life. In His grace God gave Jane the signs and the encouragement she needed.

My mother had an encounter with God at the time she lost a baby during the birth. Although it brought about a breakdown and she was in a very low place for some time, she also met with God in a powerful way.

She recovered emotionally but the encounter with God never left her. She didn't live on a spiritual mountaintop,

but did live more fully and completely in God's presence thereafter.

That's what an encounter with God seems to be for, an experience of God in a new way that reshapes life afterwards and reframes how we experience life. We can be open to it, but how and where and when it occurs is not in our control.

I've been to events like Spring Harvest and New Wine which I've enjoyed and I've had some important spiritual moments there but I'm not sure I would claim they were mountain top ones quite like the transfiguration.

Experiencing God in a powerful way isn't restricted to church or conference, it could equally occur in the fells, or by the sea, in your garden, or at home in an armchair. God isn't restricted by location.

The account of the transfiguration in Mark is typical of Mark, the bare facts of the story. When you read the account in Luke you discover Jesus had taken the three disciples up the mountain to pray and they got sleepy and reading between the lines dozed off.

When they come to Jesus physical appearance has changed, he is blazing white and there are two others with Him, Moses and Elijah. I think there's a lesson in there for us...something about it being unexpected. Going somewhere with Jesus to pray was not that unusual. Climbing a mountain...maybe a bit unusual. Falling asleep while praying...not unusual...the same thing happened in the garden of Gethsemane.

In other words God might chose a moment when we are not being super spiritual, not paying as much attention as we might and not expecting it.

There's also another element to this experience. They were really frightened. That might put some of us off. In one way, to have a powerful and life changing experience of God is something one might seek...but the fear factor causes us to shy away.

Why were they afraid? They knew Jesus well. They had identified his true nature (this event follows on from Peter declaring he was the Messiah).

Shining white as lightening though.  
Two saints of old appearing with them.  
They gained an insight, a glimpse of who Jesus truly was to match their head knowledge of him as Messiah...it left them afraid.

This opens for us a conundrum found throughout the bible, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. It's the use of the word fear. For us the word is entirely negative.

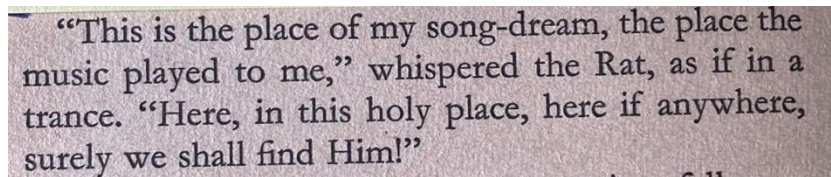
Our Loving Heavenly Father longs to draw close to us, Jesus shows us how much the Father loves us, St John says that perfect love drives out fear.

Surely fear has no value in our spiritual experience. I would have wrestled with this more had I not read the finest description of drawing near to God and offering worship that I have ever known...tucked away in the Wind in the Willows and the chapter, The Piper at the Gates of Dawn.

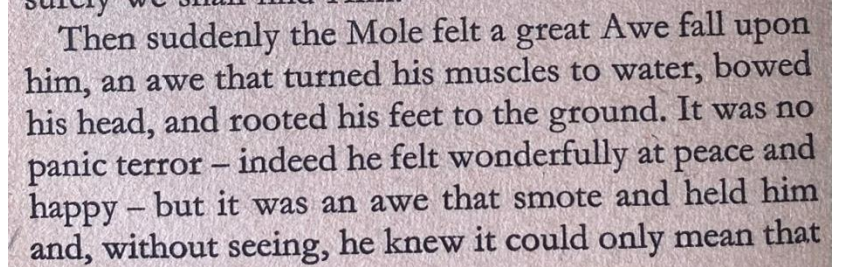
It's an allegory of course. Kenneth Graham lived with his Uncle, Curate at the church at Cookham on the Thames and the stories he wrote drew on the countryside there and his experience of worship. He could not have written about drawing close to God the way he has done had he

not had a profound encounter with God himself.

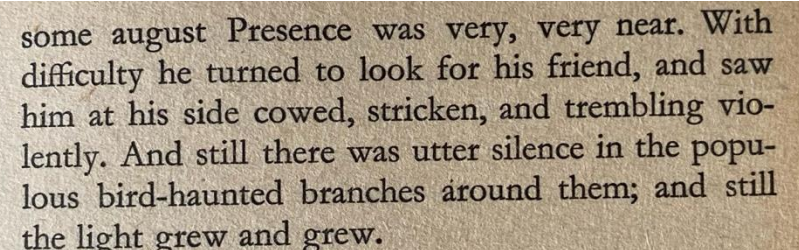
In the story we have the Rat and the Mole searching for a lost baby Otter, they are drawn by music to an island where their search becomes for something greater and they encounter the Great Friend and Helper. As I say, it's an allegory. Listen though to what is described particularly about fear.



“This is the place of my song-dream, the place the music played to me,” whispered the Rat, as if in a trance. “Here, in this holy place, here if anywhere, surely we shall find Him!”



Then suddenly the Mole felt a great Awe fall upon him, an awe that turned his muscles to water, bowed his head, and rooted his feet to the ground. It was no panic terror – indeed he felt wonderfully at peace and happy – but it was an awe that smote and held him and, without seeing, he knew it could only mean that



some august Presence was very, very near. With difficulty he turned to look for his friend, and saw him at his side cowed, stricken, and trembling violently. And still there was utter silence in the populous bird-haunted branches around them; and still the light grew and grew.

The animals do indeed meet the Friend and Helper

morning sky; and still, as he looked, he lived; and still, as he lived, he wondered.

“Rat!” he found breath to whisper, shaking. “Are you afraid?”

“Afraid?” murmured the Rat, his eyes shining with unutterable love. “Afraid! Of *Him*? O, never, never! And yet – and yet – O, Mole, I am afraid!”

Then the two animals, crouching to the earth, bowed their heads and did worship.

worship here can echo that experience and we can be reminded of who He is while we live down in the valley.

Let us pray

**Revd. Jon Hutchinson, 11/2/24**

How could we possibly draw near to God, August Presence, Awesome and Majestic, Eternal and all Powerful (God as described in our Psalm reading) and not feel awe and tremble in fearfulness AND YET still be filled with love and peace and wonder and joy.

A contradiction? No, I don't think so because as we draw near we become enfolded in God's great love for us, so that any trembling, being rooted to the ground and sense of fear doesn't prevent us from the peace and joy of drawing close to God.

Before each service we like to pray and often we have just half a minute...and that's not out of disrespect or being casual, we are prepared and enjoy greeting people and we're getting ready. When we pray, I frequently ask that we might encounter God in our worship.

Of course you might be disciple like and feeling sleepy, you may be distracted by other things going on in your head full of other noise. We can come and go and not have met with God but thankfully God can overcome our inadequacy by his grace.

I would love everyone to have their own encounter with God, wherever and whenever that might be so that our