

Bennochy church 16th July 2017

There is something moody and atmospheric about mountains in low cloud and grey skies. If you have done any Munroe bagging I hope you get what I mean. It can be intimidating, especially if you cannot see where you are going. I used to do a bit of Munroe climbing and the ironic thing is, I don't like heights. I have walked in pouring rain, in white outs where you can hardly see your nose, through cloud, in gale force winds where you can hardly stand, but I can't remember walking in thunder and lightning. Imagine the scene, you are approaching the hill and it is back lit with lightning and the thunder is echoing off the hills all around.

There is probably not a better known story in all of the bible than that of Moses receiving from God the 10 commandments. In days gone by, in Sunday school, you might have had to learn the 10 commandments off by heart. This morning, however I don't want to focus on the commandments themselves, but on what is happening around this mountain, that adds to the mystery of this momentous event in the life of the people of God.

The story is part of Israel's desert wandering, between them being slaves in Egypt and arriving in the Promised land. It is both a time of great unknowns, fears, hopes and expectations. They arrive at Mount Sinai. If you want suspense, then hide your presence. There is nothing more fearful in what people cannot

see. Hiddenness seems to hold a certain amount of power. In this story we are told God is visible, but only by being hidden in the cloud. He is there. The people are acutely aware of that, but he is never actually seen. What a way to transmit, not just the presence, but this idea of the majesty of God. You are not allowed to see God. He is too powerful. They are told keep away from the mountain. Keep a safe distance from the presence of God. Moses is even told to set up a boundary around the mountain that the people must not cross. Don't dare cross, for the consequences will be fatal.

This is a world we don't understand. There are no cultural contact points between us and them. I would go as far to say, this a God we do not know. We live by the words of Jesus, *come to me, all who are weak and heavy laden and I will give you rest.* We are told it is safe to approach. Jesus said, *I have come that you might have life, life in all its fullness.* In this story, God offers death to those who come too close. This is a event shrouded in, what I would describe as, the holiness of God. A holiness so strong, that it can never be approached or seen.

In the mind of the writer, there is here a clear demarcation between God on the mountain, his presence hidden in the cloud and his people, who are clearly not worthy of his presence and only able only to see him, 'obscured by clouds'. It is similar in some way to Pauls words, *What we see now is like a dim image*

in a mirror; then we shall see face-to-face. What I know now is only partial; then it will be complete—as complete as God's knowledge of me. (1 Corinthians 13:12)

They had to make themselves ready to meet God. God seemed to be there in that one place, for his one people, part of their Exodus experience. We know that is not true, God is not contained in time nor space, but is how the writer understands this event. It is the way God is portrayed. God meets his people in the most dramatic of events. In that place, in the history of his people, we are told God's presence is loud. That we can say, loud in thunder, lightning and a trumpet blast. God's presence and noise causes fear. The sound escalates and God speaks in the voice of thunder. There was no way the people were going to miss the presence of God!

Over time things begin to change. On the very same mountain, Elijah, who was still not allowed to see the face of God, experienced God, not in earthquake, wind or fire, but in the whisper of a still small voice. The tone is changing. God is still majestic and holy, but there is now no need to shout. God and people are coming closer. Our relationship with God is moving in the direction of compassion and grace, and is ultimately revealed in Jesus Christ. Power is now understood as love. Scripture says, *perfect love casts out all fear.* (1 John 4: 18)

Where does God meet us? How does he speak? Sometimes he still has to shout, and we experience God on the mountain,

shrouded in mystery. A God who says, come no closer, for this is holy ground. It is no longer about fear. it is about wonder. But there are moments in life, when we need to stop, enter the holy ground and be in the quiet place, of the presence of the Lord. To wait and to listen to the still small voice of God. Quiet, it is a powerful whisper. Loud in compassion, and full of hope.

Standing by a mountain, their eyes were obscured by the clouds, today, we climb the mountain. Have we eyes to see and ears to listen. Amen.