

We continued our six hour journey
towards the summit of Mount Hermon.

The higher we went, the more we needed to take breaks
and the more the breaks became unbearable
due to the freezing wind.

In fact, we could not stop for more than five minutes at a time;
otherwise, the wind-chill would freeze us to death.

At 2700 metres altitude, we were at the limit.

Exhausted, both in mind and body!

We gathered our remaining energy
to make the final summit push.

There, we faced a choice between a shorter route,
crossing a landmine field,
and a longer one going around it.

Confident of the ten feet of thick snow cover,
we crossed the minefield,
adding some thrill to our ascent of the Great Hermon.

The view from up there was unbelievable.

Everything was white;

for a second, we thought we were in the North Pole.

From Lebanon's Cedars in the North
and Cyprus in the blue Mediterranean in the West

to Lake Galilee in the South,

everything shined under the thick snow cover.

We tightened our boots and plunged into the ski run of a lifetime.

For more than an hour

we traced the mountain with three crisscrossed outlines,
more than a mile of near vertical drop: Exhilarating!

I reckon it was Mount Hermon that Jesus climbed
with his disciples for his Transfiguration.

Looming over Israel's Northern border,

it is over 9000 feet high,

higher than Snowden, Helvellyn and Ben Nevis

put together,

so it would be some climb.

No wonder only Peter, James and John,

muscular fishermen, could make it,

with the rest of the disciples,

pen pushers like Matthew and Judas

out of breath by base camp.

For six years I organized a retreat

for York Diocese senior staff in Wharfedale,

inviting them to climb Simon's Seat with me,

a mere 1200 feet.

Only two ever made it.

Mount Hermon snatches the moist warm air

blowing in from the balmy Mediterranean

making it shiver and drop its load,

so Hermon's top is perpetually snow-covered.

Brilliant, dazzling white.

The melt water from the snow forms the Jordan

which flushes Lake Galilee and makes Israel lush.

Mount Hermon gives life,

enabling green rather than desert,

a truly Promised Land.

Jesus and Peter and James and John

were climbing up to the very source of Israel's life.

I will lift my eyes unto the hill

from whence cometh my help.

As they climbed Hermon

Israel's source of life,

they encountered the ultimate source of life,

Hermon's creator and their creator,

God shining in Christ,

who makes our deserts green,

breathing life into our very deadness.

Psalm 122

'I will lift my eyes unto the hills

from whence cometh my help.

No, my help cometh from the Lord,

who hath made heaven and earth.'

When they get to the snowy top

like our modern-day climbers

they were totally blown away, dazzled by the scene.

And as they surveyed the panorama,

the lesser mountain tops in all compass directions,

two mountain top men from across the ages join them.

That Big Daddy of the Jewish race,

Moses who received the Law on Mount Sinai

is joined by that other Big Daddy,

the prophet Elijah,

who on Mount Carmel
saw off 450 prophets of Baal:
450 celebrity atheists of his day.
All 450 of them Elijah put to the sword
and proclaimed God was king.

What was going on?
Were the three disciples hallucinating
after the fiercest of climbs?
Or in the light of Christ,
were they seeing that light shining through the ages
through his servants.
Or was the God of all time
running the story of his entire life before the disciples,

the tale of the loving purposes of God
from the first days of our disobedience
unto the glorious Redemption brought us by this Holy Child,
as the Carol Service Bidding Prayer quaintly puts it.

All they normally got was an instant, a freeze frame,
today they got the entire film.
Moses and Elijah,
the very best of the Law and the Prophets,
yet filtered through another hill
which might catch their gaze,
the Mount on which Jesus preached his famous sermon:
‘Love your neighbour as much as you love yourself.
Love your enemies.

Do good to those who hate you...'

Even prophets of Baal, even celebrity atheists.

And did they see into the future as well as the past?

The Mount of Olives to the south,

where Peter, James and John

would again slumber

and awake to see Jesus

not transfigured before their eyes,

but rather arrested, betrayed,

tried, beaten and crucified.

Or was somehow transfiguration there too,

as they gazed south at another hill at Calvary

and heard Jesus in the cruelest of deaths

practising unto death what he had preached:

'Father forgive them;

This very day you will be with me in paradise;

Father into your hands I commend my spirit.'

The cruelest of deaths in a year of such cruel COVID deaths,

yet breathing words of such utter grace.

And would they gaze from Hermon's top

at another future hill,

the mountain where the risen Jesus

finally ascended into heaven,

with his promise to the disciples,

'Behold, I am with you each and every day

until the completion of the age.'

Three hills from the past,
three hills from the future,
geographically very close
from Hermon's perspective,
merging into one
as they are glimpsed from Hermon,
the highest of Palestine's hills.

On the brink of Lent
we look to the God of Moses
our moral compass
as we wander through life's COVID wilderness,
through the confusions of this world
aching to be saved by Christ.

We look to the God of Elijah
who stood by his prophet
when the odds were 450:1 against.

We look to the God of Jesus,
ever merciful and forgiving,
who was betrayed, crucified
yet risen and glorified.

Transfiguring moments

to transfigure our every moment.

'This is my son, my chosen, listen to him,'
proclaims the voice from the cloud.

Lent is a time to do just that, to shut up,
pause in our endless round of business
and simply listen to him.

And also to be on the watch
for our moments of transfiguration,
whatever the mountain top,
be it the mountain top of glory
or the mountain top of desolation
when the penny will drop,
the lights will shine
and we will see our life
not as pointless but as purposive
and cherished by none other than God.
'You are my beloved daughter,
you are my beloved son,
with you I am well pleased.'

The Bright Field by R. S. Thomas
I have seen the sun break through
to illuminate a small field
for a while, and gone my way
and forgotten it. But that was the pearl
of great price, the one field that had
treasure in it. I realize now
that I must give all that I have
to possess it. Life is not hurrying
on to a receding future, nor hankering after
an imagined past. It is the turning
aside like Moses to the miracle
of the lit bush, to a brightness
that seemed as transitory as your youth
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.