Not what I expected! Mark 9:2-13. February 14th 2021

Many years ago I was at a show with my children, part of the show was the use of dry ice for effect. The theatre was in darkness and the dry ice was triggered, we were near the front and becoming enveloped in this mist, I was unable to breathe, it was incredibly frightening, I grabbed the arms of my children on either side of me, they recognised my fear. I knew it would dissipate but until it began to lift it was terrifying. (I don’t sit that close to the front now).

Jesus three disciples, the one’s who appear to have shared particularly significant events with him, were not only suddenly encompassed by a cloud, they experienced a cavalcade of astonishing phenomenon just in this brief account.

Jesus took them up a mountain, in fact a very high mountain, such an experience in itself can be awesome. Within their own faith tradition mountains were seen as places where significant events occurred. Significant leaders in their history encountered God on Mountains, often in startling circumstances.

Then Jesus becomes dazzling, luminous, overwhelmed by shining brilliance such that they felt words inadequate to fully describe their experience. Moses and Elijah appear, key leaders in their history, often associated with the law and the prophets, two leaders whose lives ended in mysterious fashion who were believed to have passed directly into the presence of God without dying. Elijah was expected to return before the “day of the Lord appeared”[[1]](#footnote-1) and Moses was told that a prophet like himself would be raised up from amongst the Israelites to whom they must listen.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Elijah and Moses talk with Jesus, we don’t know what they say, but we know that Peter appears to want to prolong this encounter and makes his awkward suggestion of creating shelters for them. We read that by now Peter was terrified, but it doesn’t stop there, then the cloud enveloped them and then the voice comes reaffirming Jesus as God’s Son and commanding them to listen to him. Finally the cloud disappears and Elijah and Moses disappear, so the disciples are left with Jesus alone, and all their questions.

Such an experience is astonishing. We may struggle to comprehend how and why this would happen. This was not a common experience in Jesus day or in the history of Israel, but the Israelites were aware of some other extraordinary occurrences associated with some of their past prophets and leaders, indeed they may have been aware of incidents which we have never heard about.

Now, as in those days, extraordinary experiences have been part of many people’s reality, but there is certainly a hesitancy to talk freely of such things.

Morton Kelsey in his book, “Encounter with God”, comments on his experiences in pastoral ministry. He had experienced some dreams and other extraordinary perceptions of the Divine, he began to speak more freely of these in his church. He said “soon my parishioners started to come to me, tentatively and half afraid, to tell me of similar experiences in their own lives. Almost every time the person thanked me for trying to understand, and wanted me to know that they had been afraid to speak to anyone of these experiences, particularly around the church, for fear of being considered unstable.”[[3]](#footnote-3) These types of encounters have a powerful effect, often a life-changing effect. We see this in the biblical narratives and we see it in the lives of Christians through the ages.

So Peter, James and John are confronted with this extraordinary experience. But why? The context of the story may help our understanding. In the big story of the gospel the disciples have now spent significant time with Jesus. They have heard his teaching, seen him heal people, liberate people, challenge religious authorities and welcome those who would normally be avoided or even ostracised. They have received far more of Jesus teaching than the crowds, they have seen how he has lived, they have been aware of his attitudes and values. This Jesus is remarkable, inspiring, and indeed in the previous section Peter has affirmed him as the Messiah.

However, they have also begun to hear Jesus talking about his impending sufferings and death, and again in the previous chapter Peter rebukes him for such pronouncements. They have had amazing “mountain top” experiences with Jesus, but they have also had confusing, disturbing interactions with him. Clearly Jesus has very different ideas to their own regarding what the Messiah would do and say. No doubt they were struggling to put all this together. Who was Jesus? What was he going to do? Why does he speak in cryptic puzzling ways?

Then we have the story we read. An encounter that points back to the revelation of Jesus at his baptism, with similar words being uttered whilst they were under the cloud. Yet this time there was not just the affirmation that he was indeed the Son of God, but also a command for them “listen to him”.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In Mark’s gospel, like in Matthew’s this story comes towards the end of Jesus time of ministry. This also emphasises the need for the disciples to be paying close attention to Jesus, to be listening attentively, to really seek to understand what he is saying.

Extraordinary experiences of God’s presence will be of little value unless they are listening to Jesus. The same is true for us. We can be thrilled and inspired by certain experiences with God, but we need in the midst of the exhilaration to keep listening, and to recognise that what we hear may be surprising. As they went down the mountain and talked some more with Jesus, he again began referring to his forthcoming sufferings and death. Immediately prior to this incident we read of Jesus also challenging his disciples that they must be ready to “deny themselves take up their cross and follow [Jesus}.”[[5]](#footnote-5) He even goes on to be abundantly clear that this path may cause them to lose their lives.[[6]](#footnote-6)

So this story reminds us of the value of extraordinary experiences. It encourages us to affirm their validity but also to recognise that in any experience we need to be intently listening to what Jesus is saying to us. It reminds us that sometimes the “veil of ordinariness that normally prevents us from seeing the inside of a situation is drawn back and a fuller reality is disclosed.”[[7]](#footnote-7) It reminds us that we live in communities where many are seeking to develop the spiritual aspect of their lives, and we have good news about how Jesus meets spiritual needs.

It also reminds us that Jesus often defies our expectations. Our understanding of Jesus will always be partial, so we need to remain open to Jesus overturning our thinking, and giving to us a fuller picture than we have previously held, of what God is really like.

It also prompts us to sit with the mysterious elements of our faith, to recognise that some things are particularly difficult to comprehend or articulate. That sometimes the best immediate response is to take time to sit in awe and wonder and to worship God.

This story also reminds us that Jesus path to glory was a path of suffering, shame and self-sacrifice even to the point of death. It challenges us to accept that following Jesus is costly. Following Jesus is a very earthy experience, as we seek to live out the good news of God’s great love for us all. Jesus deals with our spiritual needs that we may be free to share God’s love with others by words and deeds.

1. Malachi 4:5 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Deut. 18:18-19 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Morton Kelsey, *Encounter with God,* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship Inc, 1975) 38 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Mark 9:7 NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Mark 8:34 NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Mark 8:35 NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. N. T. Wright, *Mark for Everyone,* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004) 114 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)