

LIFE ISN'T ALL RAZZLE DAZZLE

→ So, there's a mountain. There's some dazzling white clothes. There's Moses and Elijah apparently appearing out of nowhere. There's Peter's seemingly misguided and ill judged offer to build three places to sleep and there's the booming voice from the sky! For some, this may sound like the opening scene of a science fiction novel or an action movie but actually of course, those of you that have been coming to church for at least a few years will perhaps have become quite familiar with this story that comes around every year just before Lent.

.....This story of the transfiguration of Jesus which happens right on the edge of his journey to Jerusalem and the events that will ultimately lead to his death appears in all three of the synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke – so it doesn't matter what year we are in with regards to the lectionary readings that we are encouraged to follow – we will always encounter this story every year!

.....And the trouble with stories that come around every year is that preachers who've been preaching for a while can wonder what else there is to say about a particular passage of scripture and congregations can feel as if they've heard it all before. It's all been said, we think! And in some senses that will always be true because these texts are many years old, so the odds are that whatever insight I may have into this text, someone will have had it before me! But God is still speaking today and even if we are feeling as if we've heard it all before, let's prepare to be surprised by what God may say to us today through this familiar story and these familiar events.

→ I guess it would be fair to say that most sermons I have heard or most sermons I have preached about the transfiguration have focused on two main things. They have either focused on what actually happens on the mountain top itself – on the transfiguration itself, on Peter's longing to stay in that place and on the affirming voice that comes from above or they have focused on what happens when we have to come down from the mountain. What do we do with those mountain top experiences? How do we use them in the days that follow? And of course, any of those reflections on this passage of scripture have the potential to challenge and enrich us in our spiritual lives.

.....But this year, as I read this passage again, I began to wonder not so much about what happened on the mountain top or what might happen afterwards, but more about the journey that had gone before; the path the disciples had taken to arrive at this point. What is that journey like – the journey that results in us reaching the mountain top in the first place? What comes before the razzle dazzle of the transfiguration? How do we get up the mountain in the first place in order to encounter God in a new way and be transformed?

→ Well, how do we get to any high point in anything in our lives? Often through sheer hard work and determination! You only end up standing on the winners podium at the Olympics, or playing in the Halle Orchestra at the Bridgwater Hall or performing on the stage at the Royal Festival Hall as a result of hours of training and practice. We all know that we can't pick up a flute today and play flawlessly tomorrow. Neither can we pick up a French-English dictionary on the

morning before our holiday and expect to be speaking fluent French when we arrive at our holiday destination the next day. We know that we can't simply pick up a tennis racquet or a wooden spoon or some car keys and be able to hit a winning shot at Wimbledon or whip up a Mary Berry speciality or drive like a Formula One driver straight away.

.....We know that all of these things take time and effort and doing things over and over and over again before we do it right and we do it well. Yet, somehow, we often think or have even been led to believe, that as soon as we start talking to God in our prayers or reading his word or we join a Home Group or we get together with some others in a prayer triplet that amazing things are going to happen. We want to be on the mountain top. We want to encounter God in ways that other people have described. We want to be changed. We want some razzle dazzle! And when it doesn't happen, it's very tempting to give up because it can feel very mundane and very hard.

.....And then perhaps a few months or even years later we try again. We turn over a new leaf at New Year or at the Covenant Service or at some other particular moment in our lives. But it doesn't happen. No instant changes in our character. No easy ways out of the temptations that we face. No clear messages every time we open the Bible. No lightning bolt from the sky when we come to worship. Where is the mountain top experience? Where is the razzle dazzle? Where are the exciting encounters with God that I could dine out on for years? Why isn't it happening for me?

→ We know that mastering pretty much anything else in our lives takes time, patience and lots and lots of practice. It's only by doing over and over again the things which are sometimes tedious and boring and not at all what we're hoping for that something happens. It's like creating a beautiful garden. You can't just throw a seed into the grass and expect prize-winning tomatoes overnight. You have to work the ground, prepare the soil, nourish the plant and keep all the weeds and bugs away. Most days, it's boring and tedious and not at all uplifting. But then one day something wonderful happens. A flower appears and then after some more weeding and watering and just plain staring at the plant every morning to see if anything has changed, a little round green thing appears. And then over time, after more unexciting work, the tomato grows and ripens and then, and only then, do you get that absolutely wonderful chance to bite into a fresh tomato that you have grown.

.....And surprise, surprise, it's the same with our faith. It takes practice and it takes work. Praying every day, even when it feels tedious and our minds wander and we don't feel as if we have anything to say. Reading the Bible regularly, even when it's complicated and doesn't seem to make any sense. Attending worship regularly even when not every service speaks to you or is to your liking. These are the regular, sometimes mundane, but very necessary practices that build the foundation of our spiritual lives and prepare us for those holy, mountain top, transfiguration moments when we experience God's grace and love in all its fullness. If we haven't done the preparation, can we really expect anything to happen. If there's no fertile ground, the tomatoes won't grow. If we haven't practiced our scales we can't play Fur Elise and if we don't practice our verbs we won't speak fluent French!

.....Look back at your Bibles and see where this passage is set. Just before this, at the end of chapter 16, Jesus had been talking to his disciples about suffering and death. He had been trying to help them understand the things that would happen to him, and more than that he had been trying to help them understand what it would really mean for them to be his disciples. And he didn't talk about mountain tops or dazzling clothes, but he talked about forgetting self and carrying crosses and losing lives. You can't get much further from the razzle dazzle of the mountain top than that, but this is the path we are called to tread on our way to the top of the mountain!

.....The disciples were led up the mountain by Jesus. We've got to be following closely it seems in order to find our way there – it's not something that we achieve on our own. So, as we draw closer to the beginning of the season of Lent, this seems to provide us all with a perfect opportunity to commit ourselves afresh to improving our daily practice of the ordinary and the mundane. It's a time when we are encouraged to examine ourselves and prepare ourselves as we journey with Christ and as we get ready for the glorious celebration of Easter – you don't perhaps get much more razzle dazzle than that!

.....So what can we do. Stretching before us we have six weeks in which to practice our scales or improve our tennis shots or refine our cupcake recipe! We have six weeks in which to work on the ground of our faith and only you know what aspects of your discipleship need working on right now. So, I encourage us all to pick one thing to practice during Lent. It may be praying every morning, or reading a chapter of the Bible each day, or giving thanks before every meal, or following the Water Aid challenge which the World and Neighbourhood Action Team have put before us, or learning a new worship song each week or finding a new charity to support during this period.

.....Don't overwhelm yourself by trying to play Fur Elise by Ash Wednesday evening or by expecting to be fluent in French by next Sunday because at that rate you'll never make it to Easter. But whatever spiritual discipline you choose, try to do it every day during this season of Lent. If you miss a day, don't fret but pick it up again the next day and soon you'll discover I'm sure that the every day practice will allow fresh light to shine into your life. You will create a new habit and step by step you'll find yourself climbing the mountain and drawing closer to God and the joy of Easter Day will be all the more wonderful.

.....Life certainly isn't all razzle dazzle, as we know, but if we are faithful in the ordinary everyday practices of our faith, then we can be sure that we will find God in the midst of it all, bringing light and truth into our lives in ways that will change us for ever.