“As they were coming down the mountain…”

In Chester I used to be one of the chaplains at our local hospital. A few days before Christmas we found ourselves with a group of volunteers from local churches singing carols around the wards. It is a big hospital and we had to fit into a tight timetable between ward rounds and visiting. So at each ward we sang two carols, then dashed along the corridor to wherever would have us next.

I wasn’t sure we were really doing much good. Most of the time the curtains round beds remained closed, or someone was obviously watching Corrie and just turned the sound up. But we persevered. We had a list and felt we had to visit every ward on it.

In the last ward we got to, a bit later than we should and feeling we were intruding on the busy staff, there was a side room with a door just ajar. A family was gathered, clearly deeply upset. Should we sing?

We decided we ought to, and the door remained open. We sang our usual two carols and then tried to leave as quietly as possible. I was the last to leave and as I followed our small group down the corridor the door opened and young man came out.

“My father has just died,” he said. “We’ve been here for hours, it’s been a terrible day. And right at the end you sang carols. He left this earth with a smile on his face. Thank you.”

There are moment of transfiguration. There are moments when you stand on a mountain top and everything is made clear. There are moments when God’s glory touches the messiness and chaos of our mortal humanity.

Remember what I said about Mark’s Gospel – it was written for Christians who were finding life hard. As I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, Mark begins with prophecy, a voice often rejected, and with Jesus’ baptism, his identity with those who choose to follow him. And do you remember the voice that spoke at his baptism – this is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased?

Here again, in this moment of transfiguration, the same identity – this is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him.

Mark is a master storyteller. In the shape of his gospel the transfiguration is a turning point. It is from here that Jesus moves towards Jerusalem. He knew where that road would lead, it is a journey towards the cross.

Mark’s readers were mostly Jews, people whose grasp of reality and understanding of who they were had two foundations – the giving of the Law and the voice of prophecy.

The Law was the bedrock of God’s relationship with his people. In Moses God had called a people out of slavery and led to freedom. In Moses they were chosen and God entered into a covenant with them. This was a mutually binding relationship. You shall be my people, I shall be your God.

The sign of this covenant relationship was the Law – that when people lived in the land God gave them they would remember all they had was a gift. They would treat the poor with respect, leave a harvest for the refugee, uphold the practice of Jubilee – a time when all debts are wiped clean. The poor will not get poorer, and the rich will not get richer.

These are a people living in obedience to God – a holy nation who did things differently. This is the Law.

Of course human beings fail, we forget our best intentions, we allow our dreams to fade, and when that happened God sent a voice to call people back, to remind them of the covenant, to heal the relationship. This was the voice of prophecy. Often a hard voice, but one that spoke the truth.

Two foundations of relationship – the Law and the Prophets. The Law given through Moses, the greatest voice of prophecy heard in Elijah.

And so in this transfiguring moment, when the path ahead is so difficult, when his friends cannot believe this is the road he must tread, Jesus encounters Moses and Elijah, the Law and the Prophets. Everything God has done leads to this moment. Everything God can do depends on what Jesus does next.

And he choose the hard road, he turns towards the cross.

“As they were coming down the mountain…”

We all have mountain top experiences. Moments when everything is clear, or something we do goes so well, and we sense a certainty that God is close. But you always have to come down the mountain.

If you read just a bit further then you find that as Jesus and his disciples came down the mountain the first thing they ran into was an argument. Conflict broke out, they went from the glory of the mountaintop to the messiness and chaos of other people.

That is how faith is. We need to be reminded constantly that faith is not about staying up the mountain where everything is clear. Faith is about clinging on that glimpse of glory when you’re down in the valley and everyone is being a pain in the neck.

Most of the time we are not up the mountain. Most of the time we are in the shadows of the valley and the way ahead is not clear. But moments of transfiguration happen, and they matter, and when they do remember what direction they point.

Gracious and holy Father, give us wisdom to perceive you, diligence to seek you, patience to wait for you, eyes to behold you, a heart to meditate on you, and a life to proclaim you; through the power of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.