

## *On Mountain Heights*

**An Address for Mountain Sunday by Dr Noel C Schultz,  
October 8, 2006, St David's, Canterbury.**

**In this address I plan to present three scenarios to encourage, even stimulate you, to open your heart and mind to recognise some of the spiritual possibilities associated with being on mountain heights.**

### **1.**

**First of all I want to pick up the thoughts expressed earlier in the service about being on mountain heights. Who among us has not been inspired, uplifted, and moved to wonder and praise when standing on a mountain top, surrounded by rocks or towering forests, and down below, stretching as far as the eye can see, are forests, hills, streams, lakes and towns? On mountain heights our vision is dramatically enlarged, we see with clearer perspective our own littleness compared with the greatness of the world around us. On mountain heights the things that bug us, the people who annoy us, the fears that haunt us, seem insignificant by comparison. We are overwhelmed by the openness, the expanse, the wonder of God's creation. For many it is a deeply spiritual experience.**

**You don't have to stand on one of the towering peaks of the European Alps, or the Himalayas. Mt Abrupt in the Southern Grampians, Mt Buffalo in the Australian Alps, even Mount Lofty in the Adelaide Hills, or our own Mt Dandenong can enable us to have a vision that is more than physical, it can be deeply spiritual. The sense of holy awe which all of us have known when we walked into Europe's great cathedrals is often excelled when we stand on one of God's holy mountains. One does not see clouds or stars the same way when they are framed by peaks and valleys. The purity of the air, the smell of the trees, and the sound of a river provide a different ambience from the city below. Location affects perspective.**

**Stripped of all the playthings, the distractions, the trivia that consume so much of thinking, feeling and doing, we stand on these mountain heights small and insignificant in the greatness of expanding horizons. On mountain heights, without the gadgetry of computers and dishwashers, the noises of television and motor vehicles, without the distractions of newspapers and grandstanding politicians, we can hear**

**our heart beat in harmony with the ultimate source of life. On mountain heights there is a sacral quality, a relationship to the cosmos which other places do not possess.**

**To have experiences like these on mountain heights can cause mountains themselves to become symbols of the divine, the eternal. Not surprisingly, it was on mountain heights that some of the greatest spiritual insights have been experienced by prophets and apostles, religious leaders and saints: for example, Moses on Mount Sinai when he was given the 10 commandments (Exod. 19:16-18) and again on Mount Nebo when he saw the land of promise stretching out before him (Deut. 34), and, as we will see in the third part of this address, Jesus Christ gained some remarkable insights on mountain heights..**

## **2.**

**But let us concentrate in the second part of this address on the people of God in Old Testament times and their experience of one special mountain. In comparison with the great mountains of the world, the people of Palestine had for the most part only hills. But what made some of their hills sacred and inspiring was the religious association they had with those places. None more so than Mount Zion. This was the hill that King David captured from the Jebusites and it was on this spot that King Solomon later built the first temple. Jerusalem was subsequently built around Mount Zion and the six other nearby hills.**

**Generation after generation of Israelites, religious pilgrims from all parts of their land and beyond, would annually journey up to the temple on Mount Zion to worship the God they had come to love and trust. On the way up they would sing and chant songs of faith and hope, some of which have been preserved in the O.T. Scriptures; you will find them in the book of Psalms, from 120 to 134, Songs of Ascent they are often called.**

**Imagine yourself in one of these groups of religious pilgrims, journeying slowly on foot, breaking forth in the words of Psalm 121 as you first caught sight of the temple high on a hill in the distance: ‘I will lift up my eyes to the hills, it is from there that my help comes. My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth’. Then with quickened steps as the pilgrims came closer and formed in procession to enter these sacred places of their longing, they would chant the words of**

**Psalm 122: 'I was glad when they said to me, let us go to the house of the Lord. Our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem.'**

**When at length they arrived, full of joy and reverence, they would sing within its precincts: 'Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion which cannot be moved, which stands for ever. As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people from this time on and for evermore'(125).**

**Mount Zion was both a place and a symbol of the divine, and a representation of their relationship with God. For believers it was a symbol of ultimate deliverance, a symbol of something new and dramatic that God would bring about. Isaiah spoke about this often, as we heard it again in today's reading (2:2ff) 'In the days to come the mountain of Lord's house shall be established as the highest... all the nations shall stream to it. Many people will come and say, "Come, let us go up to Yahweh's mountain, to the house of Jacob's God" ... For out to Zion shall go forth instruction and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem...'**

**We have don't the time to pursue this thought further, but many of you who love the great hymns of earlier days will recall how often Zion is presented as a picture of the church (e.g. 432, 441, 446).**

### **3.**

**I hasten to present the third scenario on mountain heights. In preparing this address I became aware as never before of the significance mountain heights had in the life and ministry of our Lord in St Matthew's gospel. The writer presents us with five extraordinary events in Christ's life - all on mountain heights. Scholars (such as Terence Donaldson and K Hanson) have pointed out that Matthew's mountain motif has profound theological meaning for Jesus ministry, from initiation to commissioning. Let me mention the five scenes very briefly:**

**i) No sooner is Jesus baptized when he is led up from the Jordan valley to the mountains, where over 40 days he struggles to reach a clear understanding concerning his mission and his identity (Matt. 4: 1-11). His spiritual strength, loyalty, and obedience are put to the test**

**before his ministry is initiated: will he opt for food, or perform spectacular feats, or accept power from an ungodly source? It is there in the mountainous wilderness of Jordan that he comes to know what he is being called to do.**

**ii) The story of Jesus transfiguration (Matt. 17) is again located on a mountain. Again, it is there that Jesus comes to a renewed understanding of his sonship and he sees it from the perspective of his death and resurrection; he is given a divine endorsement to proceed along the path of obedience ‘This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased, listen to him’.**

**iii) Jesus’ best known sermon was preached on a mountain (Matt.5-7). Here on a mountain he initiated his disciples into his teaching. The sermon on the Mount is essentially instruction for his followers, the church of every age, as to how it ought to live and do his work.**

**iv) Up on a mountain, beyond the Sea of Galilee great clouds gathered around him. There he healed the lame, the maimed, the blind, the mute and many others (Matt.15: 29ff). Sickness and brokenness are signs of disorder and chaos. On the mountain of healing Jesus demonstrates his power over this chaos.**

**v) Finally, it was on a mountain in Galilee where Jesus gathered his followers together, following his triumph over death, and commissioned them to go and make disciples of all nations; teach and baptise them, he commanded, at the same time assuring them of his eternal presence (Matt. 28). Here we have the conclusion toward which the whole gospel builds: here the transformed Jesus transforms his inner circle from an inwardly-directed, tightly knit group to an outwardly-directed group of teachers and disciplers.**

**I hope you have got the drift of what I have been saying about Jesus on mountain heights. It is there that we can clearly see who he is and what his mission was. It was there on mountain heights that Jesus entered into the full authority of his sonship; it was on mountain heights that the new age, the age of fulfillment promised in Isaiah was inaugurated. Maybe we can see in the progression of those mountain experiences a picture of our own progression from initiation into the faith through to**

**commissioning for discipleship. On mountain heights, such experiences are to be expected.**

References:

Terence Donaldson (1985), *Jesus on the Mountain: A study in Matthean Theology*. JSNT Supplement Series 8. JSOT Press.

K.C. Hanson (1994), "Transformed on the Mountain: Ritual Analysis and the Gospel of Matthew", *Semeia*, 67, pp 147-170.