

Thinking Things Through: The Call of the Mountain

I worked in the Stormont Estate from September 1995 until October 2016. That's over twenty-one years, man and boy. So, for most working days during that period, I drove the same route from Downpatrick to Stormont, via Killyleagh, Comber and Dundonald.

Like any commute it had its good and bad moments. The snow or fallen trees of winter could mean time wasting detours around narrow roads and farmers' yards. But this kind of nuisance was offset by how handsome the surrounding countryside could look, particularly in late August or September when it could take on the yellow and golden hues of Autumn and harvest-time, and it sometimes occurred to me that really, I was very lucky to be where I was.

However, there was one little quirk in the journey that could catch me unawares and I resolved many times to consider it more thoroughly. But never did. Until now.

On the road between Downpatrick and Killyleagh is the Delamont Estate, which I would pass twice a day: driving north in the morning to go to work, and returning south in the evening, on my way home. When travelling north at that point, if I looked into the rear-view mirror the blanket of trees on the horizon behind me would open up, and for a period of about ten seconds the highest mountain in the Mourne, Slieve Donard, would move into view.

Of course, the same thing would happen at the same spot on the journey home, only then I would be facing it directly through the windscreen in front of me. There it would be, just briefly, a gap in the trees, and then the mountain standing big and alone.

There were days when, because of atmospheric conditions such as mist or rain, I couldn't see it at all or at least only partially. On other winter days, snow lay wrapped around its peak and shoulders. But on clear days it stood bright and solid, and seeing it so was like hearing a piece of scripture that I couldn't quite understand. I knew that it meant something about God, but I wasn't sure what exactly.

Of course, my rational mind was happy to tell me that it was just a big dome-shaped granite rock formation thrown up during a process that geologists are happy to explain to us, and to think that it was anything other than that seemed a bit silly. But just in the way that you see a compass or a pile of iron filings reacting to a magnetised piece of metal, so I reacted to the sight of that mountain but didn't know why.

I've read that mountains figure quite prominently in the Bible; being mentioned over five-hundred times. But maybe that was just because of the topography of the Bible lands? I suspect, however, it's truer to say that mountains are important for other

reasons. You will find below the names of some of the most noteworthy and why they were important.

Mount Ararat – Where Noah's ark came to rest, following the flood. (Genesis 8:1-5)

Mount Sinai – Where Moses received the Ten Commandments from God. (Exodus 19:20, 24)

Mount of Olives – Where Jesus prayed before he was crucified.

Mount Zion – Captured by David and becomes the city of his kingdom. (2 Samuel 5:1-10)

Mount of Transfiguration (Mount Tabor) – Where Jesus is transfigured, joining Elijah and Moses, (Luke 9:28-36 & Mark 9:2-8)

Mount Carmel – Where Elijah calls down fire from heaven to consume a sacrifice and exposes the prophets of Baal as frauds. (1 Kings 18)

Whatever the reasons for mountains being so prominent in Bible stories I can vouch for one idea, that when you stand on the top of a mountain, it feels like a very different place to standing in the middle of a field down below. Yes, it's rocky. Yes, the weather can be both extreme and extremely changeable. But it can also be quite quiet and intimate. And there is often a sense of a rarefied air. Of it being a cleaner place than in the tricky tumult of human business and affairs down below. Almost holy.

I have climbed Slieve Donard and Croagh Patrick (County Mayo) with friends on a number of occasions, and I'm sure I couldn't tell you exactly why we did it. I also doubt if my companions at the time could give a coherent answer to that question either. Some people do it for a good stiff walk, or to see a spectacular view. (On a good clear day on top of Slieve Donard you can see for sixty miles.)

For us, it was I suspect always more of a spiritual exercise than a physical one. But nobody talked much about that aspect of it, which I suppose was a pity. However, we were always aware that many generations of people stretching back to pre-Christian times had also felt the necessity to take the trek up those two mountains. To get closer to God. To cleanse themselves.

The least worst explanation I have come across for the connection between mountains and the spiritual for Christians is that they are heavy with symbolism. That their presence can call out to deep-seated needs within us. That we recognise certain characteristics in mountains that we associate with God. For example, their sheer scale can make us seem weak and insignificant.

“...for verily I say unto you, If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible to you.” (Matthew 17:20)

At other times, they can remind us of God’s closeness and willingness to help.

“I will lift mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth.” (Psalm 121:1-2)

They can symbolise God’s protection.

“As the mountains are around Jerusalem, so the Lord is round about his people from henceforth even for ever.” (Psalm 125:2)

And they can invite us to worship and to do so correctly. As Jesus explained to the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well.

“Jesus saith unto her, Woman, believe me, the hour cometh when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem worship the Father. Ye worship ye know not what: we know what we worship: for salvation is of the Jews. (John 4:21-24)

I call the explanation of “symbolism” the “least worst” for a reason. Because it doesn’t carry an explanation about who put it there. What I mean is, that I can find myself reacting to a picture of one of Hitler’s huge Nazi rallies at Nuremberg or of Holbein's famous portrait of Henry VIII; because I’ve known about them for a long time, and know about their histories. I’ve imbibed lots of cultural information about them over the years and so, to react to them in a particular way is understandable. However, even though I’ve known about many of the Bible stories involving mountains from childhood, nobody ever taught me anything that would cause me to react to the sight of the mountain the way that I do. I just look at it and think of God (in just the way a geologist probably would not). It’s hard-wired into me and I think that its hard-wired into many others as well.

It’s been said that the mountain isn’t just important to me or to us; it’s perhaps also important to God himself. For after all, Mount Zion was the chosen place for the temple and dwelling of the Lord.