

From a Garden to a Mountain

This week's service includes hymns and readings that will take us from the Easter garden to the mountain of the Ascension. Gardens and mountains are very significant in both the Old and New Testament as places for finding God's wisdom and love. In these passages we find that from encounter with God comes human transformation.

After our first hymn we hear the poem *Pied Beauty* by the priest and poet Gerald Manley Hopkins with his observations of the natural world helping him to express his understanding of God. And then a reading from Second Isaiah, a passage which reminds us of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before he died. Jesus and the New Testament writers interpreting his suffering and death through the sacrifice of a servant and of his being raised up to bring fulness of life for all.

Pied Beauty by Gerald Manley Hopkins

Glory be to God for dappled things –
For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;
Landscape plotted and pieced –
fold, fallow, and plough;
And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things counter, original, spare, strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
Praise him.

Isaiah 52:13-15, The Suffering Servant

See, my servant shall prosper;
he shall be exalted and lifted up,
and shall be very high.
Just as there were many who were astonished at him
—so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance,
and his form beyond that of mortals—
so he shall startle many nations;
kings shall shut their mouths because of him;
for that which had not been told them they shall see,
and that which they had not heard they shall contemplate

Forty days of Lent and forty days from Easter to Ascension. It seems a long time ago that on a dark February evening we had the Ash Wednesday Service, looking at a painting by Vincent Van Gogh and listening to the song “Vincent” by Don McLean. In the painting we noticed the comparative social isolation of the two people who are sitting and contemplating a starry starry night. We also listened to the track “By the Waters of Babylon We Laid Down and Wept” and we thought about the impact on people of living in exile. Our next reading is the early morning encounter of Jesus and Mary Magdalene in the garden where there the barriers that bring exile are gone and then we will hear the Gospel reading for Ascension from Luke’s Gospel.

Reader One

Early in the morning, one of Jesus’ friends, Mary Magdalene, came to the tomb where Jesus had been buried. She was very sad. It was now the third day since her friend had died. She wanted to spend some time quietly near the tomb, thinking about Jesus who she loved and who had helped her to know that God loved her. She was surprised when she saw the tomb, for the huge stone that had been placed in front of it, had now been moved.

Reader Two

Two angels, God’s messengers, were sitting on the stone ledge where Jesus’ body had been laid. They said; “Why are you looking here in a tomb for the dead, for someone who is alive?”

Reader One

Mary did not understand what they meant. She turned around and realised that a man was standing in front of her, but she couldn’t tell who it was because she was crying. She thought it must be the gardener.

The man said; “Why are you crying?”

Reader Two

Mary replied “They have taken away the body of my friend Jesus and I do not know where they have put it.”

Reader One

Then the man said “Mary”. Immediately Mary knew that this was Jesus.

He was alive. He said “Go and tell my friends that I am alive.”

Reader Two

So Mary rushed through the streets taking the good news to other friends of Jesus. Their friend Jesus was alive.

Luke 24:44-53 The Ascension of Jesus

Then Jesus said to them, 'These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.' Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high. Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Van Gogh painted ordinary people, people at work. He painted objects of daily life, of the natural world, spring blossom, olive groves, cypress trees and starry nights. Towards the end of his life he less and less included people in his paintings but in "Café Terrace at Night" we have a reminder of human activity and of people sharing. We cannot gather in the way that these people are either socially or in Church. We have followed the request not to compromise on this because of the evidence of how the virus can spread and so we have been finding new ways of being Church. Some interpret this café painting as reflecting Jesus at supper with his friends. Whether at a wedding party or at the house of Levi, the unpopular tax collector, or in gatherings described in the parables, finding that Jesus commends the open and radical inclusive generosity of a good host. Something our gatherings whether inside or beyond the Church should always reflect. RS Thomas also commends this way in this poem:

The Kingdom by R. S. Thomas

It's a long way off but inside it
There are quite different things going on:
Festivals at which the poor man
Is king and the consumptive is
Healed; mirrors in which the blind look
At themselves and love looks at them
Back; and industry is for mending
The bent bones and the minds fractured
By life. It's a long way off, but to get
There takes no time and admission
Is free, if you purge yourself
Of desire, and present yourself with
Your need only and the simple offering
Of your faith, green as a leaf.