

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

Mountain and valley

Presented by Steve Cooper

Good morning! An advertisement once appeared in a London newspaper. It was placed by the famous explorer, Sir Earnest Shackleton. He invited volunteers to join his team which would cross the Antarctic. Here's how the ad was worded: *Men wanted: for hazardous journey. Small wages, bitter cold, long months of complete darkness, constant danger, safe return doubtful. Honour and recognition in case of success.* Now, who would answer such an ad? Shackleton was flooded with applications, almost 5,000 men. 56 of those men were picked. So began one of the most amazing expeditions of history, where despite terrible catastrophe and suffering, all the men survived the 3 year journey.

When Jesus called people to follow him, he made it clear that the journey would involve hardship, suffering and sacrifice. He also promised that following him as his disciple would be an exhilarating adventure, leading to glory and joy in God's eternal kingdom.

Today I want to talk about this journey that Jesus calls us to; the journey of following him. He promised both hardship and joy. We need strength for those hardships, and the encouragement of knowing that Jesus is the glorious Lord who is worth following.

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Today we're thinking about the journey of following Jesus. It's a journey that involves both hardship and joy. In Mark's Gospel, chapter 8, we learn that Jesus spoke plainly to his disciples about his own journey to Jerusalem when he would face rejection, suffering, and death (*Mark 8:31*). He also invited his disciples to walk the path with him. Commitment to Jesus will involve sacrifice and suffering. At the same time, though, Jesus offers great joy to all his followers. He promised that all who are faithful to him will share in the glory of God's eternal presence.

That seems to be why the event we call the 'transfiguration of Jesus' occurred at this point in his ministry. Jesus took 3 of his disciples up a high mountain. Suddenly the disciples were given a glimpse of the glory Jesus would receive when he completed his journey to death on the cross, resurrection and ascension. He became dazzling and beautiful, in the company of God's people who had died beforehand. The 3 disciples were filled with wonder as they realised they would also share one day in God's eternal kingdom if they remain faithful to Jesus.

The 3 disciples hear the voice of God the Father: 'This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!' (*Mark 9:7*). This is the truth about the Lord Jesus. He's worth trusting and following. He's the glorious King, superior to all other teachers, God's radiant Son, loved by the Father, the centre of God's revelation about himself.

It's not easy for us to accept the clear statement of Jesus that following him will involve hardship. For many of us, life seems hard enough already! And it's true that walking in God's ways does, at times, make us feel discouraged and out of step with most of our society. The media and advertising are telling us all the time to aim for a pleasant and comfortable life, not one with suffering. It helps if we can remember this event on the mountain, where the future glory of Jesus was, for a moment, displayed. That awesome description helps us

think of the risen Lord Jesus who is now in his Father's presence. It's great to be serving such a majestic King. Like the men who signed up with Shackleton, it's worth facing hardships when the leader is worth following. I love the saying: 'If Jesus Christ be God, and died for me, then no sacrifice is too great for me to make for him'. This scene of Jesus on the mountain encourages us that if we remain faithful to Christ, beyond death we too will share in his radiance, his purity, and his joy.

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Today we're considering the journey of following Jesus. It involves hardship, but Jesus also promises eternal joy for all who receive his mercy and commit to his ways. On the mountain of transfiguration Jesus appeared in dazzling splendour to his disciples. This would encourage them to see the future glory of Jesus beyond his death and resurrection.

After this experience on the mountain, Jesus and the 3 disciples descended from the glory of the high mountain to an encounter with darkness in the valley beneath. The contrast could not be more striking. They met a crowd of arguing people. A father told Jesus a story of great pain and suffering. His son was possessed by an evil spirit. This demon stopped the boy from hearing or speaking. The evil spirit would seize the boy, throw him to the ground, and make him roll around in convulsions, foaming at the mouth. The father adds: 'From childhood, [the spirit] has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him.' (*Mark 9:17-18,22*)

Here is a glimpse into the world you and I live in each day. We live in a fallen world, where sickness, pain and suffering are a daily reality. So many people's lives are broken and twisted by evil forces. Like Jesus' first disciples, we must walk with Jesus down the mountain into the valley, and face with him the darkness and evil of this present world.

Perhaps we prefer to dwell on those aspects of the journey that are comfortable and pleasant. But this journey of following Jesus includes facing the reality of darkness and evil, both in our own lives and in the lives of those around us. Following Jesus means going into the dark valleys with him and engaging in the hard fight with evil forces. It reminds me again of those men who volunteered to accompany Shackleton on his expedition. They reasoned that it's better to engage in a risky and costly journey with a worthy leader than staying safe in a comfortable place. If we do stay safe, we're ignoring the darkness that's in us and around us.

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We've been considering the journey that Jesus calls us all to: to follow him, to trust him, to walk with him. It's a journey that involves both hardship and joy. It includes the glorious experiences on the mountain, and hard encounters in the dark valleys.

When Jesus came down from the Mount of Transfiguration, the disciples of Jesus discovered that they did not have the faith necessary to help those who are caught by the dark forces. The father of the tortured son makes his desperate request to Jesus: 'If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us' (*Mark 9:22*). Jesus replies: 'Everything is possible for one who believes' (*Mark 9:23*). Immediately the father cries out, and we can imagine the tears: 'I do believe', he said, 'help me overcome my unbelief!' (*Mark 9:24*). For this man, in this situation, faith is hard. His words are an ideal prayer for all of us when we are caught in the middle between faith and doubt. Faced with darkness in our own lives and in the lives of others, we struggle between faith and unbelief.

In the biography of a famous church leader there is a moving description of his visit to the death-bed of a Christian man. The dying man said: 'People quote various words of the Lord as containing the sum of the

gospel – the Lord’s Prayer, the Sermon on the Mount, and the like; but to me the essence of the gospel is in simpler and shorter terms – “Fear not; only believe”. And then, as the dying man reflected a moment, the feeling swept over him that those words were not as simple as they seemed. He was frightened by the frailty of his faith. “Only believe”, he repeated. Tears filled the dying man’s eyes. ‘Only believe’. But did he believe? And at last his troubled mind found expression and comfort in that old, agonizing cry of the father in our story, ‘Lord, I do believe, help me overcome my unbelief!’

Jesus had no problem commanding the evil spirit to come out of the boy (*Mark 9:25*). He explained to his disciples that this kind of miracle can happen only *by prayer* (*Mark 9:29*). That means calling out to God for help. The disciples had not prayed in seeking deliverance for this boy. They had not trusted in the God for whom everything is possible and nothing is impossible (*Mark 9:23*). Jesus invites us, when we encounter hard situations, to pray with confident faith in the powerful God. That doesn’t mean that God will always respond to our prayers by healing or delivering within a fixed time or space. It may not be his purpose to do so, in which case we must accept his will, trusting his wisdom. Remember how Jesus taught us to pray: ‘Your will be done’ (*Matthew 6:10*).

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As the disciples continued the journey of following Jesus, it seems that everything became much harder than it was. It’s often like that on our pilgrimage too. It gets harder. Frequently, it’s the later years of a person’s Christian journey that become more difficult. Precisely when you learn to walk beside Jesus, you are given harder tasks, which will demand more courage, more spiritual energy.

The encouragement from this narrative in *Mark 9* is that Jesus *did* continue on the path of suffering, sacrifice and hardship. He went to his death for us. He *is* now the glorious Lord that we glimpse in his transfiguration on the mountain. The question, though, for us must be: are we going with Jesus? When we find ourselves in the valley, encountering the dark powers that try to destroy us and the people around us, are we still prepared to continue on the journey? When faced with crises ourselves, we can offer our prayer to the God who can do the impossible, and pray with whatever faith we may have: ‘Lord, I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!’