

SUBLIME OR RIDICULOUS?

Have you ever had the feeling that you have said the wrong thing?

That awful silence which follows an innocent remark and you sense that somehow you have put your foot in it?

My mother did once when she was running the second-hand bookstall at the Church Bazaar. She offered the minister a book called "Teach Yourself Preaching."

He was not amused.

Up on the mountain top, Peter, James and John see a glorious vision of Jesus- the man they had only known so far as a friend and travelling companion. Suddenly he is dazzling with light and speaking with their two great national heroes, Moses and Elijah. They are awestruck with the glory and the mystery of it all. Peter comes up with a bright idea- "*Let's build three sacred shelters for these three divine beings on the mountain top.*" Promptly the light goes out, clouds come over the mountain and the glorious vision fades. Peter has that sinking feeling that he has said the wrong thing.

What? What is it? What have I said? He shrugs his shoulders and looks at James and John as though it is their fault. *I was only trying to help. I only wanted to do what was right. What did I say wrong?* Good question.

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Religion is a strange thing. You can be brought up to go to church regularly, say your prayers and read your Bible every day, do your best to live a good life, yet somehow God never seems quite real to you. You feel as though you only know him "in theory." Then, usually when you are least expecting it, you experience a "brief encounter" with a real, living, divine presence and it is as though God has suddenly come to life for you.

For some people this happens when they are thrilled by a place of natural beauty, like Gerald Manley Hopkins when he wrote, "*the earth is charged with the glory of God.*" For others the encounter comes when life seems right, like the little girl who was taken from the violent streets of Belfast to spend a holiday in the Corrymeela Community for Reconciliation. When she got on the coach to come home, she said, *Good-bye sun, Good-bye sea, Good-bye God.* She had met God in this place where peace took priority over hatred.

For some, it is when they experience love. Like the boy in the Young Offenders Institution who encountered God for the first time in the only person so far in his life who had cared about him. This boy wrote his own version of the Twenty-third Psalm, beginning "*The Lord is my Probation Officer.*"

Then for others, like Jacob, this meeting with God can be in appalling situations: think of Julian of Norwich who encountered the real presence of God when she was at death's door with a terrible and painful disease; or Pastor Niemoller who heard the voice of God speaking to him when he was imprisoned in a concentration camp; or Mother Teresa who looked on the destitute and dying of India and on the brutal or indifferent rich and encountered, as she said, "*Christ in his most distressing disguise.*"

You never know quite when you will meet God for yourself but it happens.

We may encounter him in his time rather than ours but those times when God becomes vividly real to us are the times which turn our faith into a dynamic life-force rather than just a religious routine. The times when God becomes a living personality rather than a theoretical power rekindle all our love for and trust in him. So yes, in some ways, our close encounters with God seem brief and fleeting. In other ways, they remain with us for ever because they change our lives.

Peter soon learned that he did not need to build those shelters in order to keep his experience of Christ in glory because the spirit of Christ remained a living, inspiring, guiding presence in his life all the way through.

Let me finish with a story from the very first of the Narnia books. A boy called Diggory finds himself in this new, magic land just as Aslan calls it into being. He is an unhappy boy because, back in England, his mother is dying. Partly through his ignorance and partly through his own obstinacy, he brings a force of evil into this new world and places it in danger. Realising that Narnia is bursting with new and magical life he asks Aslan for some special fruit to take back and cure his mother. As he looks for the first time directly into the face of Aslan he sees tears in the lion's eyes- Aslan is as sad about Diggory's mother as Diggory is himself.

Aslan promises him help but first he sends him on a long and perilous quest to safeguard the land of Narnia from this evil he has brought in. More than once on this quest Diggory is tempted to steal the magic fruit and get back to his mother. Is not the fruit in his hand worth more than the promise of a wild lion? Can he really trust Aslan? Will his mother's time run out before he gets back? Only one thing keeps him loyal to the quest; one thing keeps his hope and trust alive- the memory of those tears in the eyes of Aslan as they looked each other in the face.

He remains loyal, he completes the quest and his mother is made well.

The untameable, unpredictable God, whom he had encountered so briefly face to face, was the one worth trusting after all and the one whose power would change his life.

Amen.