

Finding the God who journeys with us

24th October 2016

A sermon preached by the Dean of Melbourne, the Very Revd Dr Andreas Loewe, at the Installation of the Student Executive Council of Melbourne Girls' Grammar School on 24 October 2016:



I grew up with hills and mountains nearby, and hiking and hillwalking was a regular part of my senior school years. I went to an international outward bound school, and we regularly would trek through the mountains of South Wales – the bleak wilderness of the Black Mountains and the rolling hills of the Brecon Beacons. Laden with rucksacks containing tents, sleeping bags and all the kit required for a multi-day trek we set out – regardless of the weather. And if you thought that Melbourne's weather is erratic, then just add Welsh fog, sleet and horizontal rain to the four-seasons-in-a-day.

What I developed on these treks was not only grit and a permanent aversion to camping – there are good reasons why there are hotels with comfortable beds and bathrooms, and a warm breakfast that you didn't warm up on a camp stove. I also learnt to rely on my mates, look out for my team, and in particular look out for those who were struggling.

Hiking in hilly terrain can be treacherous: you can easily stumble or fall, and a twisted ankle or broken leg in the middle of the wilderness or on a mountain top is a serious accident. Hiking in changeable weather conditions is just as risky: sudden fog disorients, persistent rain can lead to hypothermia and the Welsh sleet in late autumn, early spring, and winter gave some of us chilblains and frostbite.

Why trek through the hills, I hear some you ask? Why put yourself through weather and wind on bleak mountaintops? Because it builds character, my school would have told us. And I would add: because the mountains are glorious places, even in rain and sleet. And because the wilderness is a place where we can come and find out what truly lies in us, who we are, and what we are capable of when we persevere.

Today's first reading, read for us by Charlotte, adds another dimension to the awe-inspiring wonder of the mountainside. It comes from the book of Psalms – the songs of the people of God. And so it is appropriate that this added dimension is not only about character building or perseverance, not only about grit or teamwork – though these are important experiences that can come with hillwalking or mountaineering – but about trusting in God; about seeking God's protection, and relying on God's grace.

God's home is not on the mountaintops. Nor is God's home on the hillside. When we lift our eyes to the hills we do not find our help there, but see only God's wonderful creation. God made heaven and earth, the Psalm writer knows. Yes, we may come close to God the natural world or in beautiful churches or chapels. But God really lives in the human heart, and it is there that we can find him.

With God near us, in our hearts, we have all the help we need near us. God never sleeps, never takes his eyes off us, never purposefully will let us be hurt: he will not let our foot be moved. This is not some heavenly insurance against the Welsh fog that might make us trip while we hike through the

mountains. God will put our feet on firm ground; will establish us, give us wisdom and knowledge so that we may hold our own, stand on our own two feet. Fall we may, but even if we fall we will be kept safe. We will know God to be our keeper, who keeps us from all evil, our Psalm tells us.

How can the one who made heaven and earth live in us, be so close to us like the shadows we cast on a sunny day? Our second reading from Paul's last letter, the letter to the Philippians, read for us by Ingrid, tells us that God 'humbled himself to be born as a human'. God became human so that he can be close to us; he sent his Son Jesus Christ, so that he could 'keep our lives, our going out and coming in, for now, and in future', as the Psalm we read says. God has become a human, so that we become more godly; might look not to our own interests, but the interests of others. God became human that we might become more like God.

School Captain, Vice Captains, and Student Counsellors: I congratulate you as you take on your responsibilities as the Student Executive Council. And you all: I congratulate you for having (almost) made it to year 12, and the successes you have attained so far. You have learnt a lot about the values of compassion, leadership, teamwork, perseverance and kindness, have found that it is when you look out for one another, and not only your own interests that you can succeed. Stick to those values. Don't look to the mountains in anxiety, asking whether God could possibly be there in your mountains of coursework, study or self-doubt, or whether you might stumble at the final hurdle.

Rather: look to the mountains, and know that if you set out together to reach those peaks, you will find in the journey not peril and danger but your mates, your team. And if you have your values and your God at your side, you will also find your true selves. May God keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.