

‘Come up to me on the mountain and wait there; and I will give you tablets of stone’

This is the momentous invitation to learning which no doubt many universities would love to feel conveys the magnitude of the experience they are offering. Come away to a place where you can see new vistas. Come away and spend time in wonderment. Come away to a place where wisdom will be bestowed.

The reality of university life for students is perhaps not always so grandiose. But there are threads which connect the stories of Moses on Sinai and the disciples seeing Jesus transfigured on the high mountain; with the 3 million students at UK universities today. So, as we explore these readings together, I hope that as well as thinking about God’s message in it we can also reflect a bit on the lives of students in our city and our country, what their needs and hopes are and how we can pray for them.

Moses, the disciples and students today are all people looking for something. Yearning for something, reaching out into what is unknown to them and longing to know it. Of course, in reality, people go to university with all kinds of motivations in mind, not just wanting to learn. Sometimes they are very focused on preparing for the workplace, sometimes it is peer or parental pressure, sometimes it is just a feeling that it is the next part of life. But there is also, in every student, to a greater or lesser extent a longing to learn. For those of you who are older,

imagine yourself back at 18, the age of many new undergraduates. Think of all that you have learned since and how much when you were younger you longed to know more. Think of the subjects you are now a specialist in, whether in study or in life, notice how much you understand things which were once a mystery and hold your learning with gratitude.

As CEO at SCM I often preach about learning, and I think I always end up saying that the desire to learn is baked into how God made us. He put his children in the garden of Eden and watched as Eve reached for the fruit of the tree of knowledge. We want to know more. And God answers that want in vast and cinematic ways in these stories. First his law handed down on tablets of stone, here God tells his people how they should live and worship, no longer enslaved in a foreign land, or muddling through in the desert, his law gives order and shape to a community, it answers their questions about how they should live. Everything from immigration policy – you shall welcome the alien in your land; through criminal justice, you shall not steal, you shall not commit murder and so on; to hygiene information, when mould is persistent, the mouldy article must be burned. God’s law teaches them how to treat each other, how to stay safe and thrive, and how to worship. It teaches them how to be a society.

The mount of transfiguration is another learning journey altogether, Peter has already acknowledged that Jesus is the

Messiah, so in some ways this learning is the kind which is to confirm a hypothesis. Yet it is so much more than a science experiment. If Peter thought he understood what it meant that Jesus was the promised saviour then surely the appearance of the prophets, the dazzling vision and the voice of the Father speaking out of heaven made him think again, think bigger.

But the yearning for learning is not the only desire common in all three cases. There is also a shared experience of longing for authority. This might immediately sound like nonsense. Surely, we crave freedom rather than authority. And doesn't authority also let us down. But these stories remind of that there are kinds of authority we marvel at and which we need to rely on.

When we are unsure or afraid, we want reassurance from a source we can trust. At different moments in life we might want, a doctor to tell us what illness we have, a priest to assure us our sins are forgiven or a plumber to tell us our gas pipes are safe. When the disciples heard the voice of God, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Get up and do not be afraid.' If Jesus had been a random bystander telling them not to be afraid, they may well have kept their hands over their heads, but it was Jesus, and so they looked up. There are moments where it is comforting that there is someone who *knows* that everything will be okay. I spoke earlier to the older people here, me included, to remind us how much we have learned. Now I speak to the younger

among us. If you are younger, know that we who are older do know more than we did, but still have Eve's urge to reach out and know as God knows. Because it makes no sense to us how the world it is still so unjust and that there is such wilful harm done in so many ways. We still long for there to be a grown up to turn to, who knows more and can tell us the answers. Moses is a great leader, but he never loses his yearning for God to speak. The Disciples knew God in Jesus as a friend, but they still wanted him to guide them.

That universities provide specialists in their subjects which students put themselves into a lifetime of debt to learn from, is an illustration of how important it is for us to have authority we can rely on. Any of us who are tempted to think we don't need that any more might want to notice that Jesus still has the affirming presence and words of God the Father even as he stands on a mountain glowing with light. When our human teachers fall short, we have an ultimate authority who can assure us that everything is going to be okay.

We have a longing for learning, a longing for authority but also a longing for relationship. These bible stories are magnificent in their scale, set on mountain tops with sound and light shows from the heavens. But, at the centre, these accounts are all based in the personal connection of relationship. God called a people to be his people in the Old Testament, it is already personally about this original community. But he made it even

more personal than that, he talks directly to Moses, and later to other leaders and prophets. It is a conversation, it shows the nature of God is that he wants a relationship as much as we do. In Jesus the relationship becomes even more immediate, Jesus stands on a mountain, a human with his three best friends,

A few years ago at Greenbelt I heard Malcolm Guite talking about how to write poetry. One thing he said has stayed with me. He said if a poem is about gritty things on human experience then it needs a moment when earth touches heaven. And if a poem is all heavenly abstracts it needs a moment where heaven touches earth. These moments are this. The spectacular awesomeness of God in the Old Testament, made personal in delivering the law to a single human. And the person of Jesus, walking up a mountain with his friends to be revealed as the Messiah. Heaven touching earth and earth touching heaven.

So, what then of students and the longing for relationship. Well, there is of course the human-to-human relationship. Plenty of these are made in friendships which last anything from a term to a lifetime. And of course, SCM wasn't nicknamed the society of courtship and marriage for nothing, as some former members here today will testify!

But it was also really striking that when I asked some students this week what they wanted most in a teacher at university, by far most of their comments were centred in the personal connection.

Yes, they said someone who knows the answers to their questions. But they also said someone who is interested in my work. Someone who cares, knows their students and notices when things aren't right. Someone who guides me without making me feel like my differences are a problem. Someone who engages with me. Someone who sees what holds me back and tries to make it easier for me.

They want to be known and cared for. Not every student will know that God loves and cares for them regardless of whether the university staff around them fail or live up to these hopes. But God loves them anyway. As they learn, as they see the wisdom in authority when it is deserved, and as they form relationships, they reveal something of the shape of God to us. A God who meets our desires and yearnings, to know more, to have authority which can be relied on, to connect in relationship. Because our God is always teaching us, is the only

entirely reliable authority, and who wants, above anything to be in relationship with us. Perhaps it is no surprise that when we look at the lives of students alongside these mountain top encounters with God, we see the same pattern of God's revelation. Perhaps it is because, it is when we look for the signs, his glory will be revealed in every life, every experience, every person, in the everyday every day.