On Friday, Ricarda and I were walking above Chamonix, in the French Alps. It was the last day of our two week holiday, and we still had a day left of our expensive multi day lift pass, that transported us effortlessly from the valley floor up into the mountains overlooking the town. Despite, very poor weather throughout this season (reports were averaging around ‘the worst for 35 years’ as we left—and set to continue to rise), we had been able to achieve a good number of walks over the fortnight, clocking up just over 8000 metres of ascent, and 12000 descent, courtesy of the lift pass. However, the weather was not our friend as we came to the last day, and the valley was cloaked in cloud and rain was falling.

Now, I’m not easily deterred – I may have mentioned before my children’s conviction that my gravestone will be marked with the words, “it’s brightening up – look.” (My wife is convinced it will record a more graphic statement, usually uttered when half way across a busy intersection just as the lights change.) So, by mid morning when the rain seemed to have eased, we set off on the local train, and soon found ourselves heading up into solid cloud on the Flegere cable car to catch the last walk – the one not to be missed with the fabulous views of Mont Blanc throughout just to the south.

We never saw the view. The walk was in itself enjoyable, and the rain stopped for long enough for us to eat some lunch in relative comfort perched on a rock, listening to the squeaks of the marmots. There were occasional glimpses off snow and glaciers through the mist, but that was about all.

Nevertheless, of course, the mountain was there. Indeed, we had seen it for many of the other days. We knew, without doubt, that the world was quite different to our limited perspective at that particular moment. It was, in fact, big and wonderful and unbelievably beautiful. It’s just that we couldn’t see it at the time. Our perspective was limited.

That can lead to blessings. The lunch we enjoyed on that rather damp rock was a fine fish pie form the local supermarket, bought in the mistaken belief that a Pecheurs tart was a peach flan – the mistake only realized the night before when we had unwrapped it to heat up for dessert. On Friday it became a feast to warm our bedraggled spirits. Misunderstandings can lead to unforeseen blessings – and blessings to share.

More often, though, our limited perspectives restrict our vision, and can lead us and sometimes others into serious danger. Just down the road – literally two minutes from where we were staying in Argentiere, five teenagers had set out with their guide on Tuesday to climb the difficult peak above the village, and died in a gathering storm. The beauty and grandeur of that particular mountain … so enticing, had become in the absence of clear sight, a death trap.

Through the holiday we have been following the news. The world which has been moving on beyond our valley has been full of terror and pain. The continuing war around Gaza, the desperate news coming out of Iraq, especially the death of the five year old boy whom Andrew White had baptized and who was named after him. (The investigation into our friend the Bishop of Gloucester, the accusations around Cliff Richard, neither yet resolved.) Even the death of Robin Williams, which for some of us who have been lifted by his work over the years seems to fracture the ground on which we stand, and unite us in a gasp of mourning and sadness.

What’s going on? Where’s God? What can we expect of him? I would love to explore each one of these situations this morning, but the monologue of a sermon is hardly the most appropriate context to bring together what needs to be communal wisdom from amongst all those who can each contribute a little clarity from the part that each can see. But just to take one specific example may illustrate something of how to approach others. The situation in Gaza has continued to amaze and appall.
In the Israel Palestine situation, what does the scripture have to say to the conflicting claims of those who may hold a historic claim on God's favour and protection, and those who may seem to lie outside that?

Wherever we look in the world, there is conflict and terror and pain. In this cathedral of reconciliation, it often seems to me that the challenge of speaking out into these situations is especially challenging. If I'm honest, I have found this to be so especially in relation to the Israel Palestine situation. My calling to Coventry clarified and was confirmed in the wake of a sabbatical visit to Israel and the Occupied Territories of the West Bank – but since I have been here I have been more wary than ever of speaking into that context. Where is the perspective, the clarity of vision, which is necessary to be able to speak with any authority? The story is vast, the history looks so different depending on which side you sit, and the religious dimension simply adds further layers of emotional and intellectual complexity.

It seems that Paul, and perhaps even Jesus, struggled with the same question 2000 years ago – in the light of a people who seemed by some to be blind to the reality of inner conversion and trust in God which he required, what were they to say? The passage in Matthew's gospel about the Canaanite woman is shocking, and Biblical commentators disagree about how it should be interpreted. This individual who stands up to Jesus – who faces him down – is under a double curse – her gender, and her race, both traditionally despised by the religious elite. Is Jesus’ initial refusal to respond, reluctantly reversed, reflective of his true opinion – or was he making a familiar point for his disciples and later followers, that God is more interested in the heart than anything else? Regardless of the message to the woman, however, the 'given' of the exchange is that the table belongs to those who know they are God’s people, the Jews – despite their antagonism to the one who now claims to be the Messiah. The other given, however, from the whole of the gospel passage is that those who know they have got God nailed, so to speak, really haven’t. Those who believe that they have the unique knowledge of how to behave to get on the right side of God – somehow have completely missed the point, and in so doing have lost exactly the unique relationship they were seeking to preserve, probably to the exclusion of others. Those who think they can see clearly, may have actually missed the mountain – but in so doing have unwittingly helped others discover it for themselves.

The same conviction lies behind Paul’s tortuous path through three chapters of Romans. Chapters nine through eleven, the third quarter of the letter, see Paul move on from his triumphant affirmation of the sole sufficiency of faith in God’s grace made available through Jesus Christ to the knotty problem of those of his own racial and religious background. Chapter eleven begins to draw together his arguments, starting with the affirmation read out in this morning’s reading that God has not rejected his people – how could he? They are his own family, those who will always have a place set at the table! But in the meantime, verse 15 affirms, their rejection of the Messiah leads to the reconciliation of the world.

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It is God’s grace, and our grateful response, to his overwhelming love, that holds our future - and if this is true for one person, it has to be true for all. The conflicts and divisions in the world each have common root in fear or abuse of others – in an inability to be able to sit around the table together as members of one family, in the kingdom of God. Each person feels they have to justify their own position, and that is all too often at the expense of another – I can only believe that I belong, if I can show that another person doesn’t. (I remember the same argument being presented years ago for the need to believe in hell – without a hell, heaven is meaningless. That’s simply not true – and indeed, for many, the existence of a hell would make heaven intolerable.) Or for others, the challenge of believing that they belong at all is impossible. But as Rowan Williams has said,

“the church exists because something has happened which makes the whole business of self-justification irrelevant.”

We are called to live in grace towards each other. To humbly take our own place at the table, and go out of our way to enable others to do the same. It is not our place to exclude others. God does not reject anyone.

Somewhere behind all the news stories of this week are people who feel that they cannot trust anyone but themselves – and sometimes, not even themselves. Our role is to keep believing that God has a bigger picture, a greater table, at which all can find a place, by his invitation. And in the meantime, to recognize that although we can’t see how that can come to be, we care for one another on the road, and play our part in understanding where the mountains of God’s grace truly lie.
Romans 11.33-36

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgements and how inscrutable his ways!
‘For who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has been his counsellor?’
‘Or who has given a gift to him,
to receive a gift in return?’
For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory for ever. Amen.