Being a Christian means that Jesus takes us on a journey. If we seek to walk with him, it will be a journey of ups and downs, of highs and lows. He says, in words recorded in Luke’s Gospel just before today’s Gospel reading, ‘If anyone wants to be my follower, let them put themselves to one side, take up their cross, and come after me’ (Luke 9.23). Often there’s a residual sense that, if we follow Jesus everything ought to be all right, life ought to be easier and the challenges gentler. Once we’ve tasted the glory of the presence of God, had that spiritual ‘high’, surely life afterwards will be smoother?

But taking up your cross isn’t like that, is it? Life, at whatever stage of discipleship you may be, is full of the good, the bad, and what I once heard described as the ‘valley of the shadow of the humdrum’, when it feels like you’re wading through treacle, wandering through fog. Life bearing the cross is not a smooth upward trajectory, but often a hard slog.

Yet it’s illuminated by moments of glory, and these are what make us keep on with the journey. Both our readings today tell stories that are placed right in the middle of journeys, when a surprising shaft of glory suddenly illuminates the scene. In Exodus, the Israelites are on the long slog through the desert out of Egypt towards the Promised Land, a journey that takes 40 years and a whole generation to complete. What keeps them going is the extraordinary offer of God at Mount Sinai to make a covenant with them, to enter into a partnership. The offer comes through Moses, and the Israelites glimpse a pale reflection of the glory of God in the radiance of Moses’ face, after he has spoken with the Lord.

In Luke’s Gospel Jesus goes up a mountain to pray, and suddenly those with him become aware that he’s been transformed, and that the ancient figures of Moses and Elijah appear to be talking with him. It’s a glimpse of glory, but the clouds come down (as they often do on mountains) and there is a voice that proclaims, ‘This is my Son, my Chosen One. Listen to him!’ Clouds are often a biblical symbol for the presence of God, and Peter, James and John who have gone with Jesus up the mountain would have been in no doubt that, like Moses before them, they have been in the presence of God. Like him, they have touched the hem of heaven.

Then down the mountain they go, and from the high they descend to the low. At the foot of the mountain, in the valley, is a child seized by a spirit which gives him convulsions so that he writhes and cries out. The disciples who have been left behind while Peter and the others go with Jesus up the mountain are failing. They can’t heal the boy and a note of confusion and desperation has taken hold of them and of the boy’s father. Jesus heals the boy, but the contrast is intense. Heaven one day, and almost hell the next. Yet Jesus is there in both situations.

I wonder what your experience of touching the hem of heaven may have been? The places where that happens are sometimes called ‘Thin Places’ – where the membrane between heaven and earth seems almost to have vanished. For many this building has that quality. It was designed to remind us of the throne room of heaven, as it is described in the Book of Revelation, chapters 4 and 5, a great vision of heavenly worship around the throne of the Lamb – who we see here represented as Jesus Christ in Glory. And as we enter the Cathedral we come closer to the heart of God, touching the hem of heaven, especially as we come forward to receive communion; the body and blood of the Lamb of God, broken and shed for us; the life of God reaching into us, healing us and filling us with his love.

Do you sometimes feel ‘It would be good to stay here’? ‘Here might I stay and sing’ as the hymn says. If you do, you’re in good company. Peter says to Jesus, up on the mountain, ‘It’s good for us to be here. Shall I make three tents?’ Good old Peter. Luke comments, that he was ‘not knowing what he said’, or rather (a rougher translation), ‘he hadn’t got a clue.’ But being in the presence of God is not meant to be an escape from the world, a let-off from carrying that cross. Instead it’s a reminder of why you do it, why you follow Jesus. If you want to follow him you have to leave heaven, or such of it as you might have felt. The Spanish saint Teresa of Avila once said that following Jesus
means ‘leaving heaven for the sake of others.’ And as you rise from receiving the bread and wine, the task is to go out, down the mountain, to the valley where there are children suffering in a world of confusion.

If our sense of closeness to heaven is a thin place, then there are also thick places too. These are where you may be at this time tomorrow morning. Yet Jesus is there in both situations.

One of the aspects of this building that has become increasingly important to me in recent years is the fact that a road runs through it. When they designed this Cathedral, this complex of the ruined with the new, there was a problem because St Michael’s Avenue, one of the ancient thoroughfares of Coventry, ran between the two buildings. Rather than block it off, it was incorporated, so when we leave this building, sent out ‘To go in the peace of Christ’, we stand in fact at a cross-roads with the ruins in front of us, the university on one side and the shops and banks on the other. The challenge is to move from the thin place to the thick place, and there to love and serve the Lord. It’s quite easy to experience God here, but not so easy to experience God there. The road running through reminds us that the thick places run like a seam through the thin places too. Yet Jesus is there in both places.

The memory of encounter with God on Sunday, having touched the hem of heaven, sustains us. But actually it does more than that; for it means too that we know what to look for as we follow Jesus and bear the cross on Monday. To be alert to those moments when we become aware that, even in the thick places, in fact the membrane between heaven and earth is wafer-thin. The presence of God is there in both radiance and cloud, in the bright light and the mist out of which God speaks in this story of the transfiguration of Jesus, as well as the chaos at the foot of the mountain where a young boy is suffering at the hands of evil. If this Cathedral means anything, then its juxtaposition of the ruined and the new points to God’s presence in thick and thin places, in destruction and glory. But we need the experience of God’s presence in the thin places to make sense of God’s presence in the thick places too.

So here’s a challenge for Lent. As you bear your cross, following Jesus, look his presence in the thick places of your life as well as the thin ones over the next few weeks. Each day, perhaps, spend a little time in prayer at its end reflecting where you might have sensed God in the unlikely places as well as the likely ones, and perhaps in the unlikely people as well as the likely ones too.

Jesus didn’t stay on the mountain, or in the valley either for that matter. From this point on in Luke’s Gospel a new direction is set. With the words of God ringing in his ears ‘This is my Son, my Chosen’ to sustain him, Jesus turns southwards towards Jerusalem, for this is the central turning point of the story, and in turning to Jerusalem turns towards his cross and passion. There, on Good Friday, bearing his cross, he goes to the thickest, darkest, deepest place and transforms and transfigures the darkness. In the darkness of noon as Jesus dies on the cross, a hardbitten centurion says ‘Truly this was the Son of God’; and even in that thickest of places, he too touches the hem of heaven.