

Awesome and Majestic Mountains

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In October 2012 when I undertook a pilgrimage to the Holy Land I was struck by the numerous mountains that formed part of the terrain. The landscape for the most part was desert, dry and rugged and yet much of the action that took place in the Bible was on the mountains. Our scholarly priest Fr. Selva Rathinam sj, of Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, Pune gave us wonderful reflections each day. One of his most memorable phrases was the name he said the Jewish people had for God. It was *El Shadai*, 'God of the Mountains'. Everything else perishes - trees, birds, animals and man, but mountains go on forever. Therefore they gave witness to the Kingdom of God and were often the place where covenants were made. People believed that the mountains were the abode of Gods. In October I visited Switzerland and the Swiss Alps were awe inspiring. Soon after, a seminar on Shakespeare took me to Srinagar and the mountains there were majestic. They seemed to speak to me and I listened in profound silence.

Mountains and hills are mentioned very prominently in the Bible. Noah's ark rested on Mount Ararat at 16,854 feet, after the flood (Genesis 8: 1-5). Mount Sinai and Mount Zion have a special place. It was on Mount Sinai that Moses received the *Ten Commandments*, the Law of righteous living. Mount Sinai at 7,497 feet was a symbol of God's covenant with Israel. When God spoke to Moses...

On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was covered with smoke because the Lord descended on it in fire. The smoke bellowed u from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently, and the sound of the

trumpet grew louder and louder. Then Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him. The Lord descended to the top of mount Sinai and called Moses to the top of the mountain (Exodus 19: 16-20)

Mount Zion is to the south, King David captured this area and it had become the City of David, later it was the location of Jerusalem temple. It was here that Jesus appointed his twelve apostles. Jesus seems to invite comparison with Moses because, He preached the Beatitudes with His *Sermon on the Mount*.

A number of healings too were performed on the mountains. Jesus prayed on the Mount of Olives, before the crucifixion and it was from there that he ascended into heaven. Perhaps the most famous mountain scene is on Mount Tabor, the scene of the Transfiguration. Jesus is seen with Moses and Elijah the prophet. They had encountered God on the mountain top, now Jesus is seen as the fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets. Jesus replaces the old law with the Law of Love.

From the dawn of civilization, mountains have been held in absolute awe and majesty. They were both shrouded in sacredness, mystery as well as held in terror with a sense of inescapable supernatural power. They have often been regarded as symbols of man's quest for excellence, as he strives upwards to attain his dream. The song from *The Sound of Music* beautifully encapsulates this:

Climb every mountain,
Ford every stream,
Follow every rainbow,
'Till you find your dream

Mountains also contributed to an awakening of human consciousness, creativity, enquiry and thought. Ways of seeing and understanding the human cosmos developed through a quest towards realities beyond the immediate, the ordinary and the everyday. A

great variety of philosophies often saw a significant association between mainstream human culture and mountain landscape.

In North America the Rocky Mountains are of special significance. It is a monumental and towering range that stretches from northern Canada to a distance of almost four thousand miles to the Mexican plateau in the south. Many of the migrant people, such as the Cheyenne or the Crow who inhabited the slopes would often climb to the summits and remain for long periods of time in a test of endurance. They would dare to encounter the spirits who dwelt there. And once they had communed in that way with the natural and supernatural powers their visions of life would be transformed forever. They would have visions of human existence in which the seeds of ancient wisdom could be sown and nurtured for the benefit of future generations. Such initiations would publicly and privately mark the beginning of true adulthood.

For the Crow people, the higher the altitude of the chosen site for contemplation, and the more impenetrable it was agreed to be, the more fulfilling was its meditative potential. Solitude had to be earned and sweated over. It had to be conducted in a place far away from human companionship, a place that would test the whole person in full measure. Once they purified themselves, they move off in search of fresh inspiration, new visions, further insights, and eventually greater unity with the power of the mountains.

It is impossible to understand either the land or the people of Latin America without first understanding its mountains. At 4500 miles, the Andean mountains form the longest range in the world. Of all the Andean forms of wisdom, the Inca empire came closest to perfecting the way of life which worked in sympathy with the rhythms and constraints of these mountains. Theirs was wisdom of reverence and adaptation, worship and everyday practicality as an interdependent whole. They developed wisdom in harmony with the physical adversity of their dry, high altitude and vertiginous environment. It is at *Machu Picchu* that the combined virtue of

reverence and practicality is best expressed. *Machu Picchu* is a profoundly sacred site of worship located on a narrow ridge high in the Peruvian Andes, between snow-capped mountains and Amazonian jungle. There is a great deal of mystery surrounding this place. Before the Spanish invasion in 1532 the site was abandoned by the Incas.

Like the Inca civilization the Aztec civilization flourished in Mexico before the arrival of the Spanish. This tribe had an intense awe and fear of the mountain gods. They lived in a fierce environment where the volcano Popocatepeti, near Mexico city shot flames and smoke hundreds of feet into the sky, two or three times each day. Within that terrifying environment, Aztec worship saw a demand for the ultimate invocation to the deities, human sacrifice. A ceremonial arrangement was made with the gods in which human lives were offered in exchange for the safety of their people. It was their way of dealing with the wrath of their gods. So alongside the astonishing natural beauty of Latin American mountains there has also been ferocious brutality.

There are peaks within the Himalayan mountains which are sacred to almost one billion people. For Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs and followers of the Tibetan Bon faith, these summits form a divine landscape of extraordinary inspiration and wisdom. It is a landscape which contains the birth place for all truth and understanding. It is a divine stage on which that wisdom can flourish and attain its highest possible expression. But within its darker sides, the Himalayan mountains are also capable of mortal terror and unprecedented agonies without a moment's warning. And any human life can be claimed with ease and indifference.

The *Kumarasambhava* poem written by Kalidas in the fifth century AD, contains one of the most sublime sources of Hindu wisdom. The Himalayas are held in the highest of all possible esteem. For

this is the dwelling place of Lord Shiva destroyer of all life. Yet, there too remains the spirit of Vishnu, the preserver of life. Divine destroyer and divine preserver both found their home in the Himalayas, the only place on earth worthy to serve as their home. Shiva found his beautiful bride Parvati, daughter of Himalaya, the god of the mountains, here.

Parvati, the young goddess had spent thousands of years in contemplation and austerity in preparation for the first meeting with Shiva. They were soon married in these beautiful surroundings.

Parvati's example can be a source of further meditation among pilgrims and climbers on Annapurna, the Sanskrit name meaning, 'she who is filled with food'. Here Parvati is in her most benevolent surroundings. Each year after the autumn harvest, the faithful in the holy city of Benares dedicate the Annakuta festival to Parvati's name. The goddess' temple is filled with a symbolic mountain of food which is later distributed among those who travel in search of Annapurna's blessing and wisdom.

In Greece, Zeus was king of all the gods and unrivalled sovereign of Mount Olympus. Born in Crete, in a hidden cave on Mount Aegeum, Zeus was carried to the adjacent Mount Ida where he grew up in the company of wise mountain spirits and guardians. Having thoroughly learned the wisdom of those spirits, Zeus defeated his disreputable father, Cronus, and thereafter assumed complete power over the entire universe. From his place on Mount Olympus, Zeus governed every moment of human life. With his wife Hera, their children Aphrodite, Apollo, Ares, Artemis, Athena, Hesperus and Hermes, Zeus's two brothers Hades and Poseidon and his sister Hestia, there was nothing which escaped their attention or divine intervention.

Soon the Greek gods' influence was replaced by Christianity 1500 years ago, hermits and monks sought contemplative sanctuary from the world of everyday concern. In his book, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality*, Belden

Lane discusses the pain his mother suffered from cancer surgery, the prolonged experience in a nursing home, and the onslaught of Alzheimer's disease. This prompted him to begin his own work on desert-mountain spirituality. The beginning of this kind of work he says has to be a point of profound vulnerability. Embracing desert and mountain spirituality requires assuming the hazards of a rugged land, remaining open to the threat it poses. There may be no substitute for the instructive power of place. The only other heuristic (experimental) aid of penetrating importance may be the simultaneous experience of loss in one's personal life. Certain truths can be learned, it seems only as one is sufficiently emptied, frightened or confused.

During his mother's slow journey into emptiness, he found himself increasingly drawn to the threat and allure of wilderness of desert and mountain. An inexplicable correspondence emerged between the nursing home's embrace of unconventionality and the desert's vacant sense of abandonment. Each place carried its own harsh honesty, its uncomfortable silences and grotesque extremes of behaviour. Each helped in understanding the other. Perhaps one flees to landscapes of abandonment in times of loss.

The Christian God of scripture is equally revealed in vulnerability and in triumph. This is because both actions are rooted in love. God wills us to be broken for the sake of a strength to make us whole. Divine love is incessantly restless until it turns all woundedness into health, all deformity into beauty, all embarrassment into laughter. In biblical faith, brokenness is never celebrated as an end in itself. God's brokenness is but an expression of a love on its way to completion. We are invited to share in the 'groaning of all creation' for a redemption yet to be revealed. (Romans 8:19-21). The paradox of the grotesque is that it summons those who are whole to be broken and longs for those who are broken to be made whole.

In wilderness extremity, people find themselves running out of language, driven to silence. Ordinary speech seems inappropriate. Mountain and desert people do not talk much. Their words are measured by the leanness of the landscape. In short, the liminality (ambiguity –threshold’) of desert and mountain terrain redefines every boundary giving shape to one’s life.

James Lester, in his study of the 1963 American Mount Everest expedition, analysed the personality type of those attracted to the most demanding levels of mountain climbing. He found a self-confident and assertive individuality to be the most prevalent characteristic of the group. These were no nonsense people of action. Yet he was amazed at the mystical, self-transcending experiences reported at high altitudes by those not normally inclined to transcendent experience at all. As they camped at night, on a snow-covered ledge, at twenty-eight thousand feet, some of them went through out of body experiences. They experienced a sense of oneness with everything in the universe. They exulted in their personal experience being overrun. His conclusion was that the appeal of mountains to climbers is rooted not only in its challenge to self –assertiveness but also in its possibilities for occasioning self-forgetfulness. The devotee of climbing seems ... to exemplify often the most exquisitely balanced struggle between ‘proving’ self and ‘losing’ self, with every action serving both ends.

The German mystic and Dominican preacher of the early fourteenth century, Meister Eckhart, like other mystics in the tradition, speaks of God as a mountain to be ascended without activity, a ‘marvellous desert’ into which the human soul must venture. Only as I have ‘desertified’ myself, as it were – making myself a desert, stripped of everything but the spark of the soul within – am I fit to meet that Desert which is God. With word play and poetry, Eckhart dissolves these images into nothingness as he models the radical relinquishment of thought necessary if one is to be joined to God.

References

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