

P.S.

The mighty mountains

ON MOVING to Scotland about four years ago I discovered the Munros, a set of 277 mountains over 3,000 feet above sea level, named after the man who first listed them. Of course, I didn't discover them personally; people have been climbing them for years. But it was the first I knew of them, and the time soon came to experience them first hand.

'Mountains' might be a somewhat grandiose term; by world standards a height of 3,000 feet might render them very large and craggy hills. But the scenery is rugged and splendid nevertheless, and conditions are often aggressive.

In the Psalms David writes: "Thy righteousness is like the great mountains" (36:6). It was an analogy that had been largely lost on me hitherto. But serious engagement with the Scottish scenery and climate soon changed that. It reads in context thus: "Thy mercy, O LORD, is in the heavens; and Thy faithfulness reacheth unto the clouds. Thy righteousness is like the great mountains; Thy judgments are a great deep: O LORD, Thou preservest man and beast. How excellent is Thy lovingkindness, O God! therefore the children of men put their trust under the shadow of Thy wings" (vv. 5-7).

So it is a passage evaluating the attributes of the Lord: His mercy, faithfulness and righteousness; His judgements and His lovingkindness. They extend from the very height of heights (the clouds, the great mountains) to the unfathomable depths (the great deep). He has everything covered; His character spans the farthest reaches and encompasses them all. His ways are utterly deep and rich, His character unfathomable.

But I want to home in on the phrase about God's righteousness. In what sense does the analogy work? In what respect is God's righteousness like the mighty mountains?

First, climbing a mountain is hard work. It is serious business, not something to be attempted lightly or ill-equipped. There are times on the climb when one wonders why one attempted it at all, and whether it wouldn't be better to turn back while the going is easier. There are respects in which engagement with God's righteousness can be just like this. Sometimes it seems beyond us, too much for us to tackle; there is just too much left to climb and it is such

hard work. And as the wind whips in across a ridge at speeds of up to fifty miles an hour, all one can do is drop to hands and knees and hold on. Then clouds or fog come in and everything is lost to view, save for the gloomy shape of the person climbing with you. All sense of direction can evaporate, leaving only the knowledge of where the compass says you must go. All this is a powerful spiritual metaphor.

And yet there is something that drives the climber on. The sheer massiveness of the rocks, the immovability and ruggedness of what God has made, speak volumes of Him and of His righteousness. There is so much more to be grasped and experienced than you had ever conceived of before. What can compare with this, and who with Him? There is a desire to know more, to see more, to climb further, to experience more of His infinity.

Hill climbing is attempted stage by stage; a steep climb is followed by a plateau or a resting place in the shelter of a rock. And then on and up again. At times it seems the top is just a short distance away, that the mountain has been scaled, until the rest of the mountain springs into view.

Having a relationship with God and coming to know Him better can be just like this. We might struggle as we climb and grow in knowledge and insight into Him, only to plateau for a while before the journey is continued once more. At times there is a need to stop and rest, as it were, to allow the riches of what one has come to know to sink in and become part of oneself. And then the climb must continue. Sometimes the top looks in sight, and we might begin to fool ourselves into thinking we start to have the measure of God. And on getting to *that* point, we realise just how much more vast are His ways than we had ever thought.

Yet, as we climb, discovering the mountains of God's character and righteousness, the view and the perspective we have on the world beneath us become ever more beautiful and powerful. One day we shall reach the top by His grace, and know even as we are known. But, until then, the increased perspective we gain as we journey onwards is one of the great blessings He bestows.

Mark Vincent