

Rocky mountain high: Alastair McIntosh climbs Ben Nevis with the BBC

*'A mountain in a tempest sets
our lives in greater context.'*

Listen live to the programme as broadcast by BBC Radio Scotland, Sunday 31 October
Copy and paste this link: <https://bit.ly/Ben-Nevis>



Given how few Quakers there are in Britain, we get generous exposure in the media. And you don't get more exposed than on Ben Nevis when the winter's moving in.

During October, the BBC has been making a special series of *Sunday Worship* for Radio 4, featuring the mountains, respectively, of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. So it was that I found myself – after a period of wife-enforced 'training' – climbing the beautiful stone path towards the awesome black cliffs of Coire na Ciste, on the Ben's north face. With me were my conversation partner Anna Magnusson (the well-known broadcaster pictured with me above), Mo McCullough (our producer), and Rich Parker (a local mountain guide).

At nearly four-and-a-half thousand feet in height, Ben Nevis was once a mighty volcano. It collapsed some 400 million years ago to form a cauldron-shaped caldera. On the morning of 7 October, as we set off from the car park, there was just a gentle breeze. Sun and rainbows rippled on the hills as the vista opened out towards Skye and the Hebrides. But by the time we'd climbed a couple of thousand feet, a gale was blowing. Waterfalls of frenzied streams blew backwards in a spindrift mist, and fusillades of rain with shrapnel hail killed the feeling in my hands. My teeth were set a-chattering, and the cold even put the battery in my phone to sleep.

Anna had suggested that we talk about the transfiguration of Jesus. That's when he climbed a mountain and the disciples saw his face fill radiant with light. Today, such wonders can sound quaint to many of us. Mischievously, I found myself a-humming those lines from Pink Floyd's 'Shine On You Crazy Diamond': 'Remember when you were young, you shone like the sun.' But you're not supposed to act the crazy garnet on Radio 4! I behaved myself on air. It did set me

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thinking, though, about the transfiguration's archetypal qualities – about the deeper truth that's more true than literal truth. In the transfiguration accounts, it was on the mountain, where the heavens meet the earth, that the transcendent and the immanent converged. Here, the human being, Jesus, stood revealed in his divinity. The Orthodox church of Greece, Russia and other Eastern churches takes such 'theosis' or 'divinisation' as central to their outlook. They see it as the pilgrim end-point for us all. 'Man is the human face of God,' said Gregory of Nyssa, in the gendered language of his day. And our calling is, as Quakerism also has it, to seek that of God in all.

Mo had asked us if we'd each bring a prayer to share. All Quaker ministry, properly speaking, is prayer:

words or other actions that are Spirit-led, a holding in the Godspace, and a relaxing into letting ourselves be held. A mountain in a tempest can help in that experience. It sets our lives in greater context. It draws the ego to humility, so that the heart can see.

Anna wrote two prayers, and in the elemental onslaught we laughed, delighted, as the ink flowed through the moistening paper of her notebook to give them, as it were, a watercolour effect. Here's one of them.

*We are light
We are shadow
We are height
We are earth.*

*God, who is our beginning and our end,
Be with us,
In us,
In all our places, we pray
Amen*

As for me, I've been pondering the Lord's prayer. In some respects, it's just so... antiquated! But try a kind of double translation. Translation, not just from Greek to English, but from the context then to context now. For example, what did Jesus mean by 'Kingdom' (or 'basileia')? Surely not a feudal patriarchy! But perhaps, 'community'?

Likewise, with 'thy will be done'. Surely this cannot refer to a god of domineering forcefulness! Instead,

perhaps, it could be what Buddhists and Hindus call 'dharma' in its dynamic sense – the opening in us of the way of God?

So it was, that I came up with these words, with all due credit to Gregory and Pink Floyd.

*God, whose face we've felt this day
in Christ upon the mountain
God, whose face we see tormented
on the cross of the creation
God, whose face we touch
among the poor and brokenhearted*

*Grant, that we bring your radiance
down with us from the mountain
Grant, that thy community come,
thine opening of the way be done
Grant, on Earth as is in heaven,
to each of us our daily bread*

*And hallowed be thine holy name
thy God whose name is love
Amen, amen, amen*

'Sunday Morning from Ben Nevis' will be broadcast on BBC Radio 4 at 8.10am on Sunday 30 October, the day the clocks go back. The other programmes in the sequence are from: Scafell on 23 October; Snowdonia on 6 November; and Slieve Donard on 13 November.

Alastair is from Glasgow Meeting.