

Mountains were very much part of the physical landscape of biblical times, so it's not surprising that the Bible mentions mountains more than 500 times, just as I suppose it would mention rolling green hills, long coastlines and grey skies if the biblical events had taken place within the British Isles.

Mountains are mentioned sometimes simply to locate an event, like Ararat as the place where Noah's ark came to rest after the flood, or the Mount of Olives where Jesus prayed the night before his crucifixion.

But often there's more to their mention than just plain geography.

Mountains are also used to convey theology – ideas about God.

The psalms and the book of Isaiah, for example, tell us that the Lord causes the mountains to tremble, to skip, to melt, to smoke; he removes them, overturns them and scatters them.

The mountains were formed by him and declare his majesty.

Mountains also have enormous symbolic significance in the Bible as **places of encounter with God**.

Towering high above them all in significance, if not in physical height, is Sinai.

It was at Mount Sinai that God first met Moses and later made the travelling Israelites his people, and gave them his law.

Several hundred years later, when the prophet Elijah thought that God's covenant people were a total failure, God brought him to Mount Sinai to reassure him that he would nevertheless fulfil his covenant promises through the faithful minority.

Hundreds of years later *still*, Mount Sinai continues to make its presence felt in the New Testament.

Matthew, Mark and Luke clearly tell the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus up a high mountain to recall Sinai – descending clouds, brilliant light, Moses, Elijah and all.

And in a few weeks' time that's precisely where Matthew will take us.

But in fact we're there already.

For Matthew Jesus the Teacher in the anonymous hills of Capernaum is the **new** Moses, the **new** Lawgiver on the **new** Sinai.

It isn't to hand down a law which dispenses with the old that Jesus goes up a high mountain, as he himself insists, but to **get to the heart** of the Old with a teaching that brings it to its fulfilment and completion.

There is no laying down of a legal code of ethics on the new Sinai, but an attempt to go behind the letter of the commandments to the **core** of the external actions forbidden by

them; to the **inner disposition** and **virtues** of those who are called to inhabit and inherit the Kingdom of God.

The commandments of Sinai represent, if you will, the "bottom limit" of love, and its starting point.

Murder was forbidden, but for Jesus it is not enough simply to refrain from murder; His teaching plumbs to the heart of murderous intent.

It is unspoken anger, violent language, quiet contempt of the other; it is the spirit of hatred and revenge in our hearts. It is an unwillingness to forgive.

"If you bring your gift to the altar and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift at the altar, go first to be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift."

Adultery was forbidden of old.

But Jesus' focus is so much broader than the physical; his law speaks to the lust that underlies the physical, the desires of the heart which defile and dishonour.

With exaggeration not intended to be taken literally, he speaks of the need to guard our senses which are the gateway to heart and mind:

"If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away."

Loving our neighbour demands that at the very least we don't take his property or bear false witness against him, but Jesus demands we take the next step and refrain from doing evil to him in the secret affairs of our hearts.

This new teaching is not for the faint-hearted; which of us has not committed murder in our hearts; which of us is not guilty of infidelity and impurity in our hearts?

The journey Jesus invites us to take is the dangerous, careering, exhilarating path of the winter olympian through the mountains of Solchi, rather than the gentle safe ramblings of a Sunday afternoon hiker.

But it is not a teaching to cast us down into helpless and hopeless guilt.

Its radical demands *are* an appeal to plumb the depths of our motivations and our deepest loves, but above all they are an invitation to that lofty holiness that until now we haven't seen or heard about.

Fr Paul