

Three years ago I saw a photograph of a queue of mountaineers waiting to reach the summit of Mt Everest. I counted 35 people before I stopped. The Canadian filmmaker who took the picture, Elia Saikaly, vowed never to return to Everest as he summed up his experience as "*Death. Carnage. Chaos,*" He explained, "*...Within 20 minutes (of starting our climb) we saw two Sherpas had brought down a deceased climber...Within 45 minutes an Indian climber was brought down who was delirious and screaming and yelling which are the signs of acute mountain sickness.*"¹ Two hours later his group walked over another dead mountaineer.

"It was incredibly bizarre... every single climber making their way to the summit had to step over this person - absolutely devastating." They had to do this to join the '50 or 60' others at the top of the mountain who had paused to take selfies. Mr Saikaly claimed that many were traumatised after passing another dead body near to the summit, but it did not seem to deter them continuing on up. He said: "*This is your dream... and we all reached the summit and most of us didn't want to touch the highest point on earth because there were so many people up there.*"

I find it sad that a feat such as climbing the highest mountain in the world has been reduced to a photo opportunity, in which a drive to triumph, triumphs over decency. No one forced anyone to walk past the dead climber, they chose to because each individually felt that they were so close to the top of Everest that someone else's tragedy should not stop their moment of glory. Perhaps they thought the dead were dead so what difference would it make if they were walked past or not. Apparently all 50 or 60 thought something along those lines. That seems to my mind a greater tragedy than actually dying on the mountain..

The readings we have heard today have a different vision of achievement, a different height to which we are called other than to the top of a mere mountain. We are asked to share Stephen's vision in the book of Acts who speaks the truth the Jewish leaders of the Synagogue don't want to hear, and is killed for it, while his eyes gaze up to heaven's gates and forgiveness is on his lips: '*Lord, do not hold this sin against them.*' This is the vision of the Psalm writer whose poetic insight proclaims God as king over land, sky and heaven. This is the vision of John, in which Christ calls people to Himself, not to forge their own glory at the Tree of Knowledge which brings death, but to satisfy their deepest spiritual need to feed on the Tree of Life who is Jesus Christ. This is the vision of Jesus who: '*Raised his eyes to heaven*' and said '*Father, may they be one in us, as you are in me and I am in you.*'²

¹ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/05/27/climber-reveals-carnage-everest-summit-people-step-dead-body/> Accessed 27/02/2019

² John 17

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In this crystal-clear view there is no time - there is no desire - to see oneself in a selfie photograph: there is only a desire to see God. In this vision there is no urgency to pass by the dead or dying, but only an urgency to heal and to serve, to say and live the truth. In this vision there is no descent, you do not have to climb back down the mountain for fear of cold, lack of air and food and the need to go back to normal life. In this vision there is only one supreme reality: life in God.

St Gregory of Nyssa, in a homily on the Book of the Song of Songs, wrote:

When love has entirely cast out fear, and fear has been transformed into love, then the unity brought us by our saviour will be fully realised,³

This unity with God, brings about the courage of St Stephen, the yearning of the Psalmist and the contemplation of St John. The promise of Christ is the glory we are called into: it is the bond of peace, it is the love of God the Father. When the Jesus speaks the words, *'that they all may be one; that as you, Father, are in me and I am in you, so they also may be one in us'* he is speaking of you and me, his disciples.⁴ He is showing us the mountain we are climbing, and when we get to the top we shall never want to look back.

³ From a homily on the Song of Songs by Saint Gregory of Nyssa, bishop Office of Readings for 7th Sunday of Eastertide

⁴ Ibid