'Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed'.

In nomine…

I hope that you know the work of the Australian cartoonist, Michael Leunig. His cartoons are unshowy, the pictures and script are childlike, the humour is oblique.

https://twitter.com/leunigcartoons/status/892883213701578753

One recent favourite shows a conversation between two men: one standing, one lying on the ground. The standing man looks down, the recumbent one looks up. The standing figure interrogates the recumbent figure: ‘What are you doing?’ The lying-down figure replies, ‘I’m using my device’. ‘What is your device?’ says the standing man. ‘My device is the sky’, says the recumbent one. ‘Does your device have many applications?’; ‘Yes, it has sun, moon, clouds and birds’. ‘And do you have to recharge your device very often?’; ‘I don’t ever have to recharge my device. It recharges me’.

I love this conversation between a vertical human being and a horizontal one. Without being in the least bit didactic, it’s a gentle challenge to those of us who spend too much of our time in vertical mode - physically, mentally and spiritually. Lie down a bit more, it says. When I was a curate I remember being rather irritated by my training incumbent. Every Saturday morning after the 9am eucharist we would go to the church office to prepare and photocopy the pew sheet for the following day. In those days of yore the church photocopier was a primitive and sensitive creature; you had to know its foibles well to coax into printing on two sides of a sheet of paper. The procedure had five steps: 1. Remove the stack of paper printed on one side; 2. allow it to cool sufficiently, but not too much; 3. flatten it carefully under a couple of suitably weighty ecclesiastical tomes: Crockford’s Clerical Directory and Cruden’s Concordance; 4. reintroduce it to the correct drawer, remembering to orientate it correctly, trimming and tucking the leading edge with great care; 5. close the drawer with just the right degree of firmness and finally give the machine a sturdy slap, before pressing the green button and hoping for the best.

As I carried out this quasi-surgical procedure my boss would generally be seated at the table next to the photocopier, discoursing on matters of political or theological moment, both global and parochial. Did he ever offer to help? I’m sure he must have done, but my recollection is that our roles were clear: I was Martha and Bill was Mary. On one wonderful occasion in fact I recall him holding forth while leaning on the photocopier; I had to ask him to move aside to gain access to the machine. Did even this prompt him to help? No, his discourse continued unabated!

I think I felt some sense of injustice about this at the time; but looking back now, I am immensely grateful for the example he set. Bill’s unflagging focus on the horizontal – chewing the theological cud, reflecting on the parish, the nation, the world and their needs – was just what I, a rather studiously vertical curate, needed. Don’t just do something, sit there, as Stephen Cottrell puts it.
Today’s first reading from the inter-testamental work, Ecclesiasticus, also known as the Wisdom of Jesus ben Sirach, gave us a hymn of praise to perhaps the most vertical character of the OT. The prophet Elijah is a man of action: scourge of the prophets of Baal, raiser of the dead, invoker of fire from heaven; even his end was vertical as he was taken up from the earth in a chariot with horses of fire. And the hymn in his honour concludes with a prediction that he will come again before the day of the Lord to resume his vertical ministry: ‘to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and to restore the tribes of Jacob’. A man, it would seem, of unstintingly zealous verticality.

But there is another dimension to Elijah. On a number of occasions in his life, as recorded in the First Book of Kings, his stance towards the world is horizontal, both metaphorically and literally. Fleeing for his life from Ahab and Jezebel he travels a day’s journey into the wilderness and there he gives up hope. He is literally laid low, lying down under a broom tree, he asks that the Lord may take way his life and falls asleep, not expecting to awake. Likewise in the intriguing story of his encounter with the widow of Zarephath he is horrified by the calamity inflicted on the widow when her only son dies and he stretches himself out upon the child three times, begging the Lord for his life. On both occasions the energetic man of action is struck down into passivity, not seizing the initiative but simply attending the Lord’s will.

What is going on here? There is, I suspect, a clue in Elijah’s name. Elijah means ‘my God is the Lord’, the last syllable ‘Jah’ being a contraction of the unutterable name of the Lord, revealed to Moses at Mount Horeb: YHWH.

God also said to Moses, ‘Thus you shall say to the Israelites, “YHWH, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you”:
This is my name for ever,
and this my title for all generations.

Elijah – Eli-Jah – is a man whose very name declares and does honour to God. The verses from Ecclesiasticus that appear to honour him are just as much in honour of the Lord, whose name he bears. That is why the veneration in which they hold him is not idolatrous: when Elijah is praised the name and deeds of the Lord are praised too:

How glorious you were, Elijah, in your wondrous deeds!
Whose glory is equal to yours?
You raised a corpse from death
and from Hades, by the word of the Most High.

You heard rebuke at Sinai
and judgements of vengeance at Horeb.

The Cumbrian poet Norman Nicholson wrote a verse drama about the life of Elijah, The Old Man of the Mountains. Perhaps inspired by the ravens which feed Elijah in the pages of the Bible, but which are equally a feature of the hills of northern England, in his play Nicholson sets the events of the First Book of Kings in the landscape of the English Lake District with
its becks and fells and farms. Nicholson’s Elijah speaks of the experience of attunement to
God in words that reveal it to be more than a matter of sense or feeling.

_Tell us, Elijah,_

_On Carmel – what did you see?_  
  See? I saw nowt.

_What did you hear?_  
  Hear? I heard nowt.

_But, Elijah, did you not feel anywhere, in the ground, in your hands,_

_The same as I felt?_  
  Feel? There was nowt that I felt.

Such knowledge as I had came to the pith of the bones,  
Not through eye or ear or fingers; it spoke to the soul
Without the commerce of the senses…
I turned and waited for the Lord to speak. Never before
Was such a stillness in the fells. The air
Was solid as blue ice. Glaciers of silence
Smoothened across my eyes. Then the Lord spoke! Oh
It was not with ears, I heard, my ears
Were plugged still with the silence of the ice. So quiet
Was the voice that ears could never hear it. So quiet,
The sound of a mouse nibbling the dry straw
Would be as a gale in the larches compared to that;
The sound of a thrush cracking a snail on a tone
Would be as the blasting at a quarry compared to that –
Yet it entered in my bones and ran along them,
And cawed like the voice of the raven across the fells.

This is _‘the still, small voice’; ‘the sound of shee silence’_, as the NRSV puts it, that
speaks not to the ears, but to the ground of our being: ‘deep calling to deep’, the voice of
the Lord, YHWH, speaking within us.

To receive it we need to stop, turn aside from our habits. In Michael Leunig’s terms we
need to renounce our verticality for a while and lie down. Most of us are so accustomed to
a vertical mode of existence, as agents of our own existence, that this turning and waiting
for the Lord to speak comes very hard. We fear it, perhaps because it seems so passive.
And yet this needful attunement to God is not exclusively passive. Like many of the deeper and better things in life, it is both passive and active, delicately balanced between them in a middle voice. Love is like this, an intricate pattern of activity and attention; even competitive sport, that most apparently vertical of activities, is sometimes like this: Bob Beamon’s astonishing world record long jump in 1968 was as much a gift passively received as an act performed.

The glory of God is always there. However we may stifle and disregard it, God’s grace is always there too if we will acknowledge it. On this feast of the Transfiguration our calling is to turn aside and glimpse the immensity of all that God has done, is doing and will do:

Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.