

## Sunday before Lent 2022

Exodus 34.29-end

2 Corinthians 3.12-4.2

Luke 9.28-36

*And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.*

— Words from St Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians, the third chapter.

I don't tend to write sermons that are effectively 10-minute deep dives into the minutiae of biblical texts, but today's homily is a rare exception. It is, if you like, a meandering meditation on these texts. So here goes:

Setting aside the epistle for the moment, what we have in the Old Testament and Gospel readings is, at one level, two rather similar stories of men climbing mountains, where they get all shiny. But the differences between the stories might be more revealing than this reductive summary would suggest.

Moses first. This passage about the veil is part of a larger story, the climax of which involves Moses receiving the Ten Commandments from God. Now, it says here that “the skin of his face shone because he had been talking to God”, but we also know that Moses did not himself see God face-to-face. Never mind for the moment that God does not actually have a face: the author of the Book of Exodus was not quite as committed to that idea as we are now. Anyway, in the previous chapter, Moses asks to see God’s glory, to which God responds that no one can see God and live. So he doesn’t: but whatever divine encounter he did have, it resulted in his face glowing, and not in a radiant pregnant mother sort of way, but in a I-have-to-hide-my-face-in-a-veil-because-I-look-weird sort of way.

Before we get to Jesus, it might be helpful to know that something similar happened to Elijah too, who also climbed a mountain to talk with God. In the first Book of Kings, we are told that Elijah was in a cave atop Mount Horeb, where he met God not in the wind, nor in the earthquake, nor in the fire, but in the sheer silence: and we are also told that he veiled his face in his cloak as he emerged to hear God speak. Perhaps in the knowledge of what God told Moses about the

repercussions of seeing God's face, this veiling was to hide himself from God or perhaps to hide God from himself. The upshot of this is that he did not see God either.

In contrast, Jesus climbs an unnamed mountain—some say it is Tabor in lower Galilee, others that it is Hermon, just north of Caesarea Philippi—and “the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white”. And then, both Moses and Elijah appear, veiled neither from one another nor from the disciples nor even from God, but face-to-face with the God they could not previously see, but now incarnate and revealed before them. And when the disciples climbed down from the place where God spoke and was spoken to, they did not speak, but kept sheer silence.

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These are—all three—admittedly very weird stories, but the point of juxtaposing them is fairly simple, which is that Jesus is divine, and therefore that to see him is to see God: and so a new dispensation has arrived that removes a barrier between God and

humanity. Once upon a time, no one could see God and live: and that time is now over.

The point about the divinity of Christ is made in several ways. The first is in the difference between Moses's glowing and Jesus's: Moses's face shone as a result of a divine encounter, whereas Jesus is transfigured before God's voice is heard, as if to say that the glorious emanations are inherent to himself, and not absorbed or reflected from elsewhere. In other words: Jesus himself contains the glory of God. Indeed, the presence of Moses and Elijah specifically speak to this too, who once were unable to see God, but behold now his countenance.

The absence of veils is significant too. Elijah no longer needs to be protected from the divine glory, nor does Moses need to protect other onlookers from himself. And just in case we think that Moses and Elijah are allowed to see God because they are, after all, already dead, we are reminded that Peter, James, and John are present too, watching it all happening without dropping down dead themselves.

It is admittedly a rather roundabout way of making a point, but not impossibly so. And so, on cue, St Paul comes to complicate matters a little bit.

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Perhaps you are able to tell from the English translation: the Greek of St Paul's second letter to the Corinthians is notoriously difficult. Some people think he wrote it in an agitated state: after all, he is in most of the letter putting out fires, as all kinds of shenanigans have broken out in the church in Corinth.

There are a few things that are puzzling about what St Paul says here. The first is barely noticeable, unless you are really paying attention. At the very beginning of the reading we heard earlier, St Paul says that Moses "put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel *from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside*". It's not a great sentence, but we can unpack it. The idea here is that Moses's glow eventually fades, and what Moses is concealing is not the glow itself, but its fading. The reference to the "glory that was being set aside" also indicates that St Paul does not think that Moses's glow is a result of an encounter with God: rather, it is a result of his receiving of what

St Paul calls “the old covenant”, which is the law Moses received on Sinai and gave to the Israelites. None of this is in the Book of Exodus: St Paul is being a little creative with the text.

The second puzzle is also rather subtle. St Paul begins by talking about the veil over Moses’s face, but then quickly switches to talking about a veil over the faces of the people of Israel. But the Israelites in the story in the Book of Exodus were not veiled: only Moses was. But I guess the effect is the same. The veil Moses wears is intended to occlude the vision of the people, rather than his own vision: the same occlusion is achieved by veiling everyone. And St Paul is trying to make the same point about the new dispensation as I have just made about the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus: where previously we could not see the glory of the Lord, now we can.

But that’s not all, and here’s where things get both more vexing and, I hope, more interesting. St Paul talks about seeing the glory of God *as though reflected in a mirror*, and he goes on to talk about *being transformed into the same image*. It is as if he does not know how mirrors work... What we see in mirror is

ourselves; and mirrors do not change us, but reflect what we actually like.

Now, of course mirrors can be used to see things other than ourselves. That's how periscopes work, for example. And some scholars think that what St Paul means here is that we see the glory of God *indirectly*, as if through a periscope. But this doesn't seem quite right: surely, the point of being unveiled is to see things directly. So I think that St Paul is thinking about mirrors in the usual sense, and that he is trying to say something about the relationship between us and Jesus.

We look in a mirror, and we expect to see our own faces, but instead we see his: and what's more, over time our faces become the same face. There is something in this about the Christian life as we grow as disciples. We start off with a level of self-interest, even narcissism, though most of us perhaps no quite so bad as Snow White's evil stepmother with her famous mirror mirror on the wall. But then in Christ the divine and human are united, and so we begin to see our face in his and his is ours. And finally, it is no so much that we see him as in a mirror, but mirror him to the world. Something like that.