Sermon

Last after Epiphany/Transfiguration

3/3/19

Eltham

**Readings**

Exodus 34:29-35 Moses' shining face

Psalm 99

2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2 unveiled faces, seeing the glory of God as though in a mirror, reflected and being transformed into image of Christ

Luke 9:28-36

+FSHS

<https://youtu.be/OS0Tg0IjCp4>

In ancient times, to look on the face of God was to die. Why was it so thought? The face reveals much about a person, and conveys the essence of who they are. Think about the old adage that the eyes are windows to the soul. To look at the true essence of who God was, was considered lethal, not in a punitive sense, but in the sense of the mortal beholder being overcome with the realness and fullness of God's being and glory, and with the difference of being fragile, spirit-inbreathed-stardust by contrast. Because to look on the face of someone – God in this case – is to see not just them, but ourselves reflected. And that's not always something we want to see.

Yet today our readings all speak of the shining face… Moses in the first reading, whose face shone after being in the presence of God; Jesus on the mountaintop, transfigured before his disciples; and Paul talking to the Corinthians and holding out that future hope to them, that with unveiled faces they would see the glory of God as if reflected in a mirror, as they were transformed into the same image from one glory to another. On this last Sunday before Lent begins, before we join Jesus on the journey to Jerusalem beneath the forming clouds of impending doom, we are invited to taste and see, as in a mirror, the hope that lies beyond and which awaits, reflecting glory and the face of God.

Paul castigates the people of Israel all the way from Moses' time through the ages to his own time for having hardened hearts – they couldn't bear to gaze at the glory reflected in Moses' face after his encounters with God. Paul suggests there was an act of will involved in this, a bit like they were putting their hands over their eyes and refusing to see. But it was more than that, because to see the face of God was to be in relationship with God in an intimate and immediate way. And that is what he chastises the people for doing: for turning away from what, in the end, amounts to knowing the fullness of God.

Now, we have to be careful about the ways this text has been used to justify anti-Semitism. I believe God keeps God's promises, and the invitation to see the face of God is offered to all people. What Paul is doing here is pointing out the Corinthians' own, and our own, tendency to want to shut the glory of God out of our lives in preference for rules and regulations, because to come face to face with that glorious beauty is to be changed, transformed, transfigured. And that's something which is terrifying, because it means giving up some of our precious habits and well-worn thought processes and patterns. The irony is, as he says, that to do this is to dwell in the Spirit and to find freedom. Freedom from the things with which we bind ourselves (and from which we secretly yearn for freedom). What is this really all about? Control. And the illusion that we are in control of our lives, an illusion we often prefer to the uncertainty and fear of being out of control. There is nothing like looking deeply into the face of an other to come face to face with our own neuroses, fears, and insecurities. Especially when that other is God.

The thing is, seeing God with unveiled faces is about desire for the God who loves us just as we are. What do we fear from seeing God face to face? St Augustine said: "O God, you made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you." In other words, the goal of the spiritual life for Augustine was about resting in God. We've inherited that tradition – the collect in August. Gregory of Nyssa, who lived about 100 years before Augustine had a different idea. He said, what if we take seriously God's infinity? God is not just very, very big, but beyond calculation. And not just beyond human calculation but any possible calculation. If God is infinite then our approach to God is, Gregory reasoned, experienced as a perpetual deferral of seeing or having God. Unlike Augustine who sought God in order to rest in God, Gregory wrote about an unceasing, insatiable desire for God without rest and without end. That sounds pretty awful. But what if Paul's idea of seeing God's glory reflected in a mirror is on the money with this?

Let me explain. Imagine a friend seated across the table. An arched eyebrow, curled lip, darting eyes, and thousands of other movements on the page-like surface of your friend's skin invite you to look upon their inner self. Your friend's face seems to be put to use by their personality to give nonverbal expression to thoughts and feelings. As a face reader you come to know your friend better by carefully observing all of the signs written on their face. Theoretically, then, if you gaze on their face forever you would know them perfectly.

Yet, there is something wrong about this version of face reading. Faces are indeed portals of the soul -- and then again they aren't. Why not? For one thing, as you gaze at your friend they gaze back at you, and in response to what you have read on their face your face changes, which they notice and changes their face, and so it goes with no end in sight. Now consider this also: when your eyes look into theirs you see in their pupils your own reflection. So, now you have two faces to read instead of one, theirs and yours, and since they now see themself in your pupils their reading list has doubled. And so it goes ad infinitum. Your friendship has become a hall of mirrors. Gazing at your friend across the table has resulted in more mystery not less, more desire to know your friend but the growing realization that you never will. Is this what 2 Corinthians 3:16 tells us Moses discovered? The more you look the more uncertain you become about who you are and who your friend is, about what they want from you and what you must do to respond. Looking upon a face promises an unending search in which meaning, presence, and immediacy will always, as long as you gaze face to face, be deferred. In such a posture your non-satisfaction is guaranteed: the search itself is satisfying. And it makes complete sense, because God IS, and cannot be confined – not by language, not by our imaginations, not by sight, and not by relationship.

However, or perhaps, as a corollary, God IS relationship. God IS triune – a community of Father, Son, and Spirit. The glory of God is the love shared between the Trinity: the mutual gazing of each on the others. What Paul is pointing to in the Corinthians reading, is that the Spirit forms us into the likeness of Christ. How does the Spirit do this? In the community of God's covenant people. Here, in community, we are invited to gaze on the face of Christ, the face of God, and see the glory of God reflected in each other. The mistake Peter made on the mountain top when Jesus was transfigured was to desire to contain it without letting that encounter shape and change the disciples. Here, we are invited to allow our encounter with Jesus here, in this service, right now, to shine in us and transform us, change us; to see the glory of God reflected in the mirror of others – and in the faces of others, to see the glory of God which is transforming our own faces and lives.

Peter Catt, declaring the Cathedral a sanctuary, and other churches following suit. Just like the OT tabernacle, the church is the "place" in which God's glorious presence resides. In us. Among us. In the face of the refugee and asylum seeker. In the face of the homeless and down and out. In the face of that person over there who pisses us off. In the face of people we love. In the faces of people we struggle to love (or think we struggle to love). If we can learn to see the glory of God mirrored in the faces of others, we will find ourselves transformed.

Are we open to that?

Exercise: face to face. Hold in your mind the idea that God's glory is shining in the person you're facing.

The Lord be with you.

**And also with you.**