

Quinquagesima : 18th February, 2007 Behind the Veil

Exodus 34, 29-end; 2 Corinthians 3, 12 - 4, 2; Luke 9, 28-36

The Transfiguration - The Veil Which hides the Truth.

Some of you may have been lucky enough, or inquisitive enough, to have travelled down to the Sinai peninsula and made the somewhat touristy ascent of the mountain in the small hours where you are greeted by the sun rising in the distant east shortly after you have reached the top. It's a chilly but memorable experience, and in a way there is a kind of tangible sense of having stood where Moses did when he was summoned by God to receive the tablets. If the weather is clear, as it usually is there, you can see an immensely long way in all directions – a panorama unveiled – the mind is free to take in a new and whole picture; to see something in a fresh way, without the veil to obscure our sight.

Can we hope to remove the veil which obscures our sight?

The people of Israel on their journey in the wilderness have reached the foot of this great mountain in the east of Egypt where a dramatic encounter with God will take place. A great covenant will be made. If the Israelites keep to it, they are assured of becoming God's special possession, in preference to all the other nations of the earth. God wants the people to have faith in Moses. Well, these things duly come to pass and God issues instructions as to how the Israelites are to behave, starting with the Ten Commandments, and continuing with how they are to order and regulate their lives. The people are to resist worshipping the foreign gods, and smash their images. If they now worship the true God and have no covenant with foreign ones they are assured of food and water, no illness, and long life. We might reflect here that these are things still denied to many, even in the 21st century.

The glory of the Lord appears to the Israelites like a devouring fire, and Moses' face appears veiled to them. Moses has had a modified encounter with God – his face shines so brightly that the people are frightened and cannot bear to look at him. A reflection of divine authority is imprinted on his face, but for the moment it is only for him, so it must be veiled. How often do we veil our eyes, or rather our minds, from what we do not wish to see or hear? The Israelites of the Old Testament received the law tablets in great splendour, but that splendour was soon to fade away . The old order had to pass to let in a greater splendour in the divine dispensation of the spirit. Moses had a partial revelation, whereas that of

Jesus Christ is the full and final one. One splendour has condemned us; another more brilliant acquits us! One has died and another arisen.

However, Moses wasn't quite ready for his people to realise that the splendour of the old Mosaic Law was a fading one, and that the the glory of the gospel dispensation would be unfading. The veil now covers the minds of the people – they cannot comprehend the truth. Their lack of sensitivity and understanding has always hidden God and his purposes from them, and will still be doing so in Paul's time. Every time the lesson is read from the old covenant the veil is still there and never lifted – they do not see Christ. St John's immortal words – "*The word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth*" were yet to be written, but when they had been, even then people did not immediately see the light.

St Paul is in a much different position – after all, he is one of the first converts and is rock solid in his knowledge of the Saviour - he can speak out boldly and frankly, having been without Christ, and now with Him. He does not have to conceal the fact that what he wants to impart is of a temporary and incomplete nature. He can talk as if there is no tomorrow, and no alternative – it's all or nothing, right now. He is talking about spiritual and glorious ministry – not one which is hidebound by the law. He does not need a formal introduction, just the sanction of the people, open and clear on his heart. To him the people are a letter from Christ waiting to be delivered - by him as a sort of divine postman. This letter is not written in ink but with the spirit of the living God, not on stone tablets but on the pages of the human heart. God has qualified Paul to dispense the New Covenant – a spiritual, not a written, bond. The old written law has condemned people to death, but the spirit will give them life. The transformation will come from within by the Spirit – the power of the divine glory.

Do we as Christians live with a veil in front of our eyes? Have we shaken off the old and put on the new? To use an advertising cliché – have we freed the spirit?

Sometimes our eyes are veiled to true meaning, perhaps through **prejudice**. How easy it is to take our theories to scripture and search for a text to back them up; how much better it would be if we approached the Bible humbly to see what it can teach us!

Our eyes may also be veiled by **wishful thinking** – we look to scripture for what we wish to see, rather than what is there. So we might take great comfort in the many references to God's love and mercy, whilst ignoring those to his wrath and judgment. We find what we want to find, and

ignore what we do not want to see. Fire and brimstone sermons are not often on the menu nowadays.

We may further be deceived by **fragmented thinking**. The Bible is a whole entity – how easy it is to find passages to support our personal theories on, say, homosexuality or divorce, and ignore those which do not fit our views. We must read the Bible intelligently with a full view of the background. We must seek the whole message of scripture, which means, in essence, that we must read it in the light of Jesus Christ.

The veil comes between not only the Jews and the real meaning of scripture, but also between them and God. Sometimes it is the veil of disobedience – we may not see God because of moral, not intellectual, blindness. If we persist in disobeying God, we become less and less capable of seeing God. The vision of God is to the pure in heart.

The veil might also be masking an unteachable spirit. There's none so blind as those who do not want to see, and the best teacher on earth cannot teach the man who thinks he knows it all already and does not wish to learn. God gave us free will: if we insist upon our own way, we cannot learn his.

I mentioned just now that Paul spoke with a kind of *carte blanche*, almost as if he was holding a gun to the heads of the unconverted. A different approach would be advisable in our own times. Christianity in England today sits alongside other faiths growing in their numbers of adherents, many of whom were not born in this country or into our culture. The future sovereign has expressed a wish to be Defender of Faith, not *The Faith*. As we hold Christ central to our lives, Hindus, Muslims and many others are equally passionate in their beliefs.

We cannot bludgeon non-Christians into our mould; there has to be dialogue and understanding and respect; by trying too hard to promote our faith we might achieve the opposite result, and put back the obscuring veil. Perhaps we shall win people's hearts by quietly going about our Christian lives, living by precept, and showing love to all humanity, regardless of their beliefs, or lack of them.

If we want to see the glory of God, we must remove the veil from our faces, and then we too, as Paul says, are changed from glory into glory. Does that perhaps mean that if we gaze at Christ we in the end will reflect him and His image, and His reflection will appear in our lives? People often become like the one they stare at – we might emulate a film star by copying dress or mannerisms; or we might worship some other hero -

imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. But if we contemplate God, and walk looking into Jesus Christ, fixing our eyes upon him, ultimately we shall come to reflect him in the glory of leading a Christian life.

Nobody here has to travel too far to find a great example of this. In the Cathedral cloisters on Archbishop Michael Ramsey's gravestone you may read: "The glory of God is the living Man; And the life of Man is the vision of God."

Sts Matthew and Mark and Luke relate the story of the transfiguration where Christ's true identity is revealed as well as our human destiny in him – the veil between heaven and earth is now torn in two to reveal the glory of God, and all three gossellers declare that "*they* saw his glory". St John tells the story as well, but as we might expect he's moved further on, and says not "*they*" but "*we* have seen his glory." St John sees the whole story as humanity, all of us, being transfigured by incarnate light.

On the mountain the disciples were reluctant to go down – they were aware of this marvellous experience and could hardly bear to give it up. Don't we all at times want to cling on something as too good to let go? but if we hang on and on and crush it, it dies on us because of our foolish behaviour. Shakespeare says this in the opening lines of *Twelfth Night*, and William Blake knew it only too well when he wrote that:

He who binds himself to joy
Does the winged life destroy
But he who kisses the joy as it flies
Lives in Eternity's sunrise.

Where the spirit is, there is liberty, St Paul says. What does that mean? I think it means that as long as our obedience to God is dominated by obedience to a book and a code of laws, we are little more than slaves; but when we are obedient because we are moved by the spirit in our heart, then our very being has no desire other than to serve and obey God. We reach a state where we are compelled by love and not by the law. None of us likes to do anything against his will, but to do something for one we love is a privilege – love makes the most humble and menial tasks glorious. People who are in love radiate light, and when we are in love we find perfect freedom - to free the spirit and see the glory.

Amen.