

Some reflections on the readings for the Sunday before Lent

Our Old and New Testament readings are chosen today specifically to relate to the Gospel account of the Transfiguration of Jesus on a mountain. The theme that connects all three readings is human experience of the glory of God particularly as manifested in radiant light.

Exodus 34: 29 – 35

The transforming nature of intimate communion with God is afforded here only to Moses as he returns to the Israelites with new tablets of stone on which are inscribed the commandments. His mission to encounter God and return to the people with God's orders represented a renewal of the covenant after Israel broke faith with God during Moses' previous sojourn on the mountain causing Moses to break the tablets in anger on his return.

We are told that the skin on Moses' face shone because of his being in close contact with God. So he put a veil over his face when speaking to the people who were naturally fearful at his appearance. The text states that this was now a recurring experience, that Moses' face shone whenever he went to commune with God. The implication is that the veil protected the people from direct access to God's glory because due to their recent sin they were not ready for such an experience, so they had to rely on Moses as their mediator.

The appearance of shining faces has not been uncommon in Christian history among those who have experienced deep communion with God in prayer.

Psalm 99

The last of a small group of 'royal psalms (96 – 99). This psalm focuses on the holiness of the Lord and the awe and homage which this holiness evokes.

2 Corinthians 3: 12 – 4: 2

Referring to the above passage, Paul asserts that Christians, transformed by the Spirit of God, are able to face God with unveiled faces. Paul believed that Moses covered his face so that the Israelites could not see that the reflected glory of God's presence was actually fading away. Because their minds are hardened those who continue to hope only in the old covenant or testament still do not see the glory of God that those who are in Christ can enjoy 'with unveiled faces,' and are being transformed step by step by the Spirit.

Do we understand and experience that our life in Christ is one of perfect freedom, at least in spiritual terms? We have the privilege of direct access to God in Christ and can worship without fear and without need of mediation. As long as we remember that this privilege is because together we form the body of Christ, the community of the followers of Jesus. Although our faith requires us to have a relationship with God and to pray as individuals, our salvation, our 'right-ness' with God comes through being part of the greater body, the Church.

Luke 9: 28 – 36

The transfiguration of Jesus appears in all three 'Synoptic' Gospels (Mark, Matthew and Luke). It is difficult for us to deal with. It is particularly difficult to determine if there is an actual historical event here. That is not to deny that some supernatural experience involving Jesus and his three close disciples took place. It is the details that are confusing. For example, the mountain is not named, although tradition has it as either Tabor or Hermon.

There is no mention of how the heavenly figures, Moses and Elijah, are identified. It is not clear whether the experience was for the benefit of Jesus himself or for the disciples, especially to prepare them for the fateful days to come.

Taken as read, it is difficult to account for the disciples continuing not to understand who Jesus is or what his destiny would entail, following this mountain top event. How could Peter deny ever knowing Jesus after sharing in such an experience!?

But while this story is difficult to analyse, it provides a useful pivotal role in the whole Gospel narrative. It signifies the end of Jesus' ministry in Galilee, and the starting point to his journey to Jerusalem and to the cross. Perhaps we can conclude that a supernatural experience involving Jesus and some of his disciples did take place, but it has been given a fully post-Easter gloss and interpretation.

'Before the earliest gospel had assumed its present shape, the Church had fixed upon the Transfiguration as the central moment in the Lord's earthly life..... And it has done this as though to remind itself that the *whole* gospel, from beginning to end, must be read and regarded as one great vision of God in Christ.' (K. E. Kirk, *The Vision of God*).

As Jesus' ministry began with his baptism when the voice of God proclaimed that this is his beloved Son in whom he is well pleased, so here, once again, there is a divine affirmation of Jesus' identity and an instruction to his disciples to listen to him. An important message for us too.

A prayer for this Sunday:

Gracious God, on his journey to suffering and death you gave your beloved Son Jesus a glimpse of the glory that was awaiting him when he would rise from the dead. In the drabness and sufferings of our own lives and in our meagre and frustrated efforts to transform this world, may a ray of hope shine on us and all our brothers and sisters, a light that lifts us up and sustains us on the way to you and on the often difficult road toward your justice, peace and love in this world. We ask this through him who is the light of the world, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.