

**FEAST OF THE TRANSFIGURATION, 14<sup>th</sup> February, 2010**

**Through the Veil**

**Exodus 34:29-35, Psalm 99; 2 Corinthians 3:14-4:2; Luke 9:28-36**

I have long loved the words of the Opening Canticle in Friday morning prayer, and as I prayed it on Friday it illuminated today's Scriptures. This Canticle is a passage from the Book of Hebrews, telling us that "we have complete freedom to go into the most holy place by means of the death of Jesus. He opened for us a new way, a living way: through the curtain, through his own body. Since we have a great high priest set over the household of God: let us draw near with a sincere heart and a sure faith, with hearts that have been made clean from a guilty conscience, and bodies washed with pure water" (Hebrews 10:19-22)

"He opened for us a new way, a living way: through the curtain, through his own body." It's a simple but profound statement of theology: Jesus Christ – through his death, has removed all barriers, all veils or curtains that separate us from seeing God; that separate us from the possibility of a fullness of relationship with God, from the things that get in the way of the abundance of life which that relationship brings forth. There's such a wonderful resonance here with today's Scriptures and with other Scriptures about the veil being removed. Luke, Mark and Matthew tell us that at the moment of Jesus' death, the curtain – the veil - of the Temple was torn in two, from top to bottom: we understand this as a signal that God (tearing that curtain from the top) was moving out of that place never again to dwell in a temple made with hands. God was now to dwell amongst his people, in the church and through his holy Spirit dwelling in and amongst us – the veil of separation removed, as Jesus took with him into death all that marred our capacity to be in direct relationship with God.

Today's Scriptures abound with talk of veils (or curtains), and shining faces (and mountain tops – those 'thin places' I talked about at Christmas, where heaven and earth meet, where the ancients knew something big was going to happen with God). Moses' face is radiant as he returns down the mountain after talking directly with God; St Paul tells us that "all of us, with unveiled faces" [see the glory of the Lord], and are "being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory into another". Jesus was transfigured – face changing, clothes dazzling white, as he prayed- as he talked with God up on the mountain.

There's an invitation here for us to catch sight of – catch hold of, experience - the transformation possible for all of us as we follow Christ.

A little excursion into the Judaic background and religious tradition is helpful for us here. What Paul and Luke describe would have had great impact on their Hebrew audiences, but we don't get the same impact in the context of our modern lives and long-established Christian tradition.

During the lifetime of Jesus, the holy temple in Jerusalem was the centre of Jewish religious life. The temple was the place where animal sacrifices were carried out and worship according to the Law of Moses was followed faithfully. In the temple a veil (some 60ft high) separated the Holy of Holies—the earthly dwelling place of God's presence—from the rest of the temple, which was accessible to people (ie men). Only the high priest was permitted to pass beyond this veil once each year (*Exodus 30:10; Hebrews 9:7*) to enter into God's presence for all of Israel and make atonement for their sins (*Leviticus 16*). That veil – materially, architecturally, spiritually and symbolically - represented the gulf or barrier between God and humankind.

Paul, as we hear him in today's Corinthians reading, and the writer of Hebrews in the Canticle I quoted earlier, and Luke, too, knew all too well what the difference was between a relationship with God mediated through Temple and Jewish ritual, and relationship with God that no longer had a veil obscuring or defining that relationship. They knew that "we have complete freedom to go into the most holy place by means of the death of Jesus." That 'most holy place' – the very presence of God, behind the veil. They knew all about the difference between *religion* and *relationship with God in Christ*. They were at pains to teach and to assure Jesus' followers in the early church that the old ways of relating to God, through the High Priest in the Temple and annual atonement, and all the particular rules and rituals and artefacts of religion, had been surpassed in the coming of Christ and through his death. They weren't bagging out Judaism; they were teaching and emphasising that something new; something transformative at the deepest level of God's interfacing with humanity had happened with Jesus Christ.

And here we pick up Paul talking about shining faces: telling us that the veil that was once needed by Moses, and the veil – curtain – that separated God from people in the Temple, has been done away with because of Christ's death. Christ, through his death, removes the human obstacles, removes our inability to understand and see properly, and removes the sin; in fact removes all that creates a barrier in relationship – a veil – between us and God.

An Australian biblical scholar, William Loader<sup>i</sup>, explains this well, so I'll fall back on some of his words: "Paul, in the Corinthians passage today, picks up the detail from Exodus 34 that Moses put a veil over his face when he was among the people (after he had spoken to them), because he, and they, were afraid [that the radiance of God's glory would be too much for them –too exposing](Exod 34:30-35). Whatever Moses saw, it was enough to make his face glow. But the glow didn't last and it scared the people. None of this makes it bad or inappropriate, but it offers Paul the opportunity of arguing that it was a fading glow (or glory), and one the people could not really see because of the veil."

As one contemporary reading puts it: *The people back then were as thick-headed as the people of our own day – they could hear the words of God's law read out, but it never seemed to penetrate their hearts and minds. It's as though the scarf has stayed in place ever since to prevent anyone from catching sight of the glory revealed by the words*<sup>ii</sup>. "According to Paul, the person who carries the permanent and visible glow of God is Jesus. When we look at Jesus, [when we turn our lives towards Jesus; when we open ourselves to him for insight], the veil falls away. We can then really see what the Scriptures are about and we can really see God's glory, because it is permanently shining in the person of Jesus. Paul implies that when we turn to the Lord Jesus, we get an unobscured view of God. That sets us free. And free from what? From the old rules and laws that regulated the people's relationship with God; [and from any ones we ourselves might be inclined to create].

Paul refuses to retreat to rules and instead argues that he is talking about the kind of freedom which makes for transformation of people's lives. Here he puts the argument in visual imagery. The more we look at the divine glow in Jesus (which is God's), the more our lives will carry that same glow. Paul naturally understands that glow not in terms of ecstatic [mountaintop] experiences but in terms of love and compassion (thus 1 Corinthians 13!). Where these fruits of the Spirit abound we have gone far beyond what can be achieved by keeping rules, even biblical commands."

For us? This is not just a lesson in theology – although these are very important things to understand. There is invitation and promise– as always – for us personally and as Church.

***The promise?*** The veil lifting: relationship with God through Christ. A deeper understanding of the things of God, and transformation - a deep, inner change; gifted to

us by the Spirit, and God's own glorious image reflected in our love of others and in our behaviour that honours God.

***The invitation?*** That we turn to Christ; that we – individually and as his body -open ourselves to seek to see him; to be totally and thoroughly irradiated by him.

Is this an invitation that you would really want to resist; that you would want to close the curtain on?

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<sup>i</sup> The quoted parts are from William Loader, words in [brackets] are my additions.

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