

Transfiguration Sunday C

Shining Faces

3 March 2019

In the new Lectionary, this last Sunday before Lent begins is Transfiguration Sunday. It used to be called Quinquagesima Sunday: in the old, Prayer Book Lectionary, there were three "countdown Sundays" before Lent began: Septuagesima (70), Sexagesima (60), and Quinquagesima (50). They counted down the days till Easter Sunday, and also served to remind people that Lent was coming and they should be getting ready for it. While I am really sad to give up the annual opportunity to say Quinquagesima (not to mention Sexagesima, which sounds vaguely improper without being so), the new Lectionary is an improvement here. It gives us a reminder of Lent not by a countdown to Easter but with a preview of an important Lenten theme, our transformation, through prayer, to people who live more fully into the image of Christ.

Our first reading does this with a story about Moses after he had been given the Law on Mt Sinai. Moses is so central to ancient and modern Judaism that we sometimes tend to forget how important Moses also was to many early followers of Jesus. Some saw Jesus as the second Moses, a Lawgiver who brought a new Torah, or Instruction, from God for God's people. Matthew the Evangelist seems to have been influenced by this point of view, and it shows in the Sermon on the Mount, which is structured to be Jesus' act of law-giving. Others saw Jesus as the prophet-like-Moses promised in Deuteronomy, a Messiah-like figure who would lead God's people -- John the Evangelist seems to have been one of those who saw Jesus as (among other things) this prophet. So there is ample precedent for Christians to take Moses very seriously indeed.

In our Exodus reading we hear that after being with the Lord on Mt Sinai, Moses has a problem: his face is shining with light because he had been speaking with God. The people were afraid to come near to him. He has been transformed by the time he has spent in God's presence, speaking with God and being instructed by God. The shining light in his face is a physical sign of the inner spiritual change that Moses had undergone. The people were not afraid because they saw Moses' face shining. They were afraid because they recognised that inner change. Perhaps they thought it gave Moses "superpowers" or perhaps they felt reproached by the "new" Moses. After all, they had begged Moses to go and talk with God for them because they were afraid to be in close proximity to God.

Interestingly his solution is to wear a veil most of the time. I have always thought that would be very uncomfortable in the climate of the Sinai Desert, but that is not of course what is important to Moses! He took off the veil when he entered the Tent of Meeting to speak with God, and kept it off when he delivered the LORD's commandments to the people, but the rest of

the time he was veiled. So the "new" Moses does not continually remind the people of his nearness to God in ways that frighten them, though he used the change signaled by his face to lend himself authority when it was needed, such as when he wanted to emphasise that a particular command came from God and not from him.

This idea of Moses' veil as something that covers or hides the indication of a spiritual change is one of several from this Exodus story picked up by Paul in the excerpt we read from 2 Corinthians. This is a difficult letter to understand for many reasons but chiefly because we do not have the letter or letters from the Corinthians that Paul was answering. We do know that Paul and the Corinthians were embroiled in a difficult relationship and a difficult correspondence at this time, in part because of a group of people Paul rather sarcastically referred to as the Superapostles. The Superapostles were very critical of Paul's mission and activity in Corinth, putting Paul on the defensive, and it is apparently as part of that posture of defence that Paul brings up Moses and the veil with which he covered his shining face. We needn't go into all of the ways Paul used the Exodus story (sometimes changing it in ways not hinted at in the text); what is significant here is what Paul says in vv 17-18:

¹⁷ Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

¹⁸ 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; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

When Paul uses "we", we always have to look carefully at the context to see whether he is using a so-called "plural of majesty" (like the Queen), or speaks for himself and the rest of the current mission team, or means "we believers". Here I think he does mean "we believers". We, all of us,

you and me here this morning, are living with unveiled faces and so we see the glory of the Lord, the Spirit, reflected in each other. We can bear this because of the freedom that comes from the Lord -- we are free from the fear that paralysed the Israelites at the Mountain of the Lord because we have all come to know the Lord with the sort of intimacy that only Moses had experienced in the Exodus story we heard earlier. And as we gaze on the Lord in one another's faces we are all "being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another", that is, we are all being transformed into the image of the Messiah Jesus whose glory we reflect to each other, from one degree to another. Think about that the next time we exchange the Peace or meet and greet one another over coffee in the back of the church!

This idea of glory brings us back to our gospel reading for this morning. At his Transfiguration, Jesus was seen by Peter, James, and John as he truly was. There, like Moses on the Mountain of the Lord, the three disciples saw the Lord's face. And because Jesus prayed to his Father on the Mountain of the Transfiguration his face shone as Moses had done when Moses came down from his mountain. The three disciples are in one way like Moses and in another like Aaron and the Israelites -- they are not afraid of Jesus or afraid to be on the Mountain, but they are thrown for a loop by what they have seen and what it means. When the cloud descends upon the mountaintop and overshadowed them all, they were terrified.

Jesus' Transfiguration reveals what we should strive to reflect. He is the one whose true image we reflect as we too are transformed. That transformation is not easy. Just as it was not easy for Moses to go up the Mountain of the Lord and speak with God face to face, or for Peter, James, and John to remain with Jesus on the Mountain of the Transfiguration as he came to understand what his journey to Jerusalem was going to mean, so it is not easy for us to accept the challenge of living with unveiled faces as we are transformed into the image of Jesus. And we

are going to make mistakes -- of course we will. Moses came down the mountain and made mistakes, Peter, James, and John made mistakes before they even left the mountain (especially Peter!).

So we have to be willing to fall down and get up again, maybe many times. And we have to be willing to make our own journey to Jerusalem, as Jesus did just after his Transfiguration. Our journey may not end as his did, in our death. But we have to be ready for that journey and that departure, if we are really going to be transformed into the image of Jesus, really live with one another with unveiled faces in the glory of the Lord. Amen.