

Transfiguration
10/2/2013

Mark the Evangelist

Exodus 34:29 - 35

Ps 99

2 Corinthians 3:12 - 18

Luke 9:28 - 36

– take the veil from our faces the veil from our hearts

Hijab – the word immediately brings to mind the image of a Muslim woman. The Arabic word for veil stands for keeping one thing separate from another. When any veil is worn it means that some knowledge is hidden and some knowledge is known. The chief Muslim leader the Caliph, used to speak from behind a screen. Chinese Emperors did the same. It preserved the mystique of their office and made it possible to say what needed to be said, without the intimacy of being face to face. Ironically concealment and revelation are like two sides of a coin. The veil conceals intimate knowledge of a person and does not invite further scrutiny. But at the same time it identifies them as different and so exposes them in a way that invites speculation.

Take the veil from our faces, the veil from our hearts. There is a lot about veils in the readings today. After the visit to the holy mountain to commune with God a trace of glory lingered on Moses' face. The biblical understanding of God's glory [doxa] is that it infinitely surpasses all forms of human glory and is always associated with a powerful, illuminating light that is "wholly other". The Greeks call *uncreated light*, which was a way of saying it would always elude our comprehension.

The priests of Israel said that God's glory came to "rest" on Israel but God's presence always came near in a protected way, often symbolised by the presence of a cloud. In this way God's glory escaped the gaze of the sacrilegious, while remaining independent from those on whom it had come to dwell.

Glory is so hard to grasp, yet we speak and sing about it and it forms the basis of our worship. The language of glory gives to God an exalted place and tends to suggest there is an immeasurable distance between the holiness of God and human reality. There is truth in that. But in Exodus Moses is touched by glory, and comes to embody the light of God's glory to and for the people.

The people found Moses' shiny face awesome in the proper sense of that word. It was daunting and it was inspiring. It meant Moses was a mediator of the word of God. When he returned from the Mountain to speak the people were able to hear *and* see the word of God, *embodied* in him. It is was a blessing, but it was perplexing and even terrifying, so Moses veiled his face to save them from being overwhelmed. But when he went to speak to God he removed the veil.

In Luke's version of the Transfiguration story Jesus was at prayer while the disciples struggled to keep awake as they did in Gethsemane. In his transformed state they saw Jesus joined by Moses the lawgiver and Elijah the prophet. It is not going too far to say that the whole of Israel's history of faith became luminous before their eyes and was joined to events that were to come. The disciples witnessed the unveiling of a coming moment in time that was the key to God and God's love for the world. But while they were privy to the unveiling of the inner secret of Jesus' life, they did not fully grasp what it meant. They wanted to make three dwellings for the figures before

them on the holy mountain. That seemed to imply the three were of equal importance, but the voice and the cloud repeat the words heard at Jesus' Baptism: This is the Son, the Chosen/the Beloved, who stands above the other two, and they are to pay heed to him.

If all this was not mystery enough, the context makes it clear that Jesus the Son bound to suffer, die and rise again. Only Luke tells us that the discussion with Moses and Elijah was about a new exodus, a journey through suffering and death to new freedom that Jesus was to inaugurate through his own suffering and death.

Everything in this scene anticipates Easter. It is as though we are permitted to stand on a high vantage point where a veil is lifted that shows who Jesus really is and what he is to become. The key to understanding this is his suffering but paradoxically this was then, and is now, a stumbling block for his disciples past and present to understand. But God does not work according to human paradigms. The Transfiguration proclaims that God's holy presence is veiled in the clay jar of a human life – a life that as a consequence of his obedience willingly undergoes suffering, and came to be raised up, fully owned by God. This is the way God is. This is the way God acts. But for many, this conceals rather than reveals the treasure of the Kingdom. Martin Luther said that *God hides himself in Jesus Christ*. Actually God goes so far as to veil himself – most especially in the cross. But in the Resurrection, the glorious meaning is unveiled for us. It is ironic that in our world we have some capacity to understand suffering but the meaning of the Resurrection is what we find hard to grasp. It functions like a veil that remains.

In Luke's world people already knew about persecution and martyrdom. He called them to listen to the Chosen one who is humble, who does not claim elitist status or tyrannical power, and who suffers with the rest of humanity. The mystery of faith is that the light of God was not extinguished by Jesus' suffering which is why in his suffering there is the promise of life. Because of what he did, we know enduring suffering does not put us out of reach of grace, and indeed, may be the very place where grace finds us. God's "Yes" to us is deep enough for that. We know how eventually the disciples were empowered to embrace suffering in their own lives, to go forth boldly and with strong hearts to witness to the Gospel. This may lead us to find the courage to embrace our own suffering and alienation, when otherwise we might turn aside from the struggle of seeking to live the Gospel in our time.

I remember an SBS programme about a visit Nelson Mandela and leaders of the ANC paid to the prison in which they had spent many years of life. Mandela himself was there for 27 years. The reporter asked, "was all the suffering worth it?" One of the men replied, "Oh yes, without the suffering, we would never have got to be where we are today."

If we want to follow the Chosen Son of God, and listen to him, then we cannot avoid the challenge of God's love veiled in his suffering. And at some point we may have to face the reality of our own suffering. The Good News is that God is among us as one whose suffering has removed the veil, the barrier between ourselves and God. That is why it may be that the place of suffering is where we will find that God has found us. When that happens, we shall have come to know the power of suffering's redemption for ourselves.
