

Pentecost 20
22/10/2017

Mark the Evangelist

Exodus 33:12-23

Psalm 99

2 Corinthians 3:17-4:7

Two Perspectives of God's Anatomy

Sermon preached by Rev. Bruce Barber

Exodus 33: 20 *"The Lord said to Moses; you cannot see my **face**, for no-one shall see me and live"* and then: *"While my glory passes by I will put you in the cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you will see my **back**, but my face shall not be seen."*

2 Cor. 4: 6 *"For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the **face** of Jesus Christ"*.

Our texts offer two perspectives of God's anatomy: back and face. They are texts peculiarly relevant to the times that we are living. Both are far removed in popular culture from whom or what God is thought to be - if God is thought about at all. We read these texts in a day when the most serious of the three daily papers that are available to us presents an extended essay under the title: "Is God Dead?" Whatever be the truth of the matter, many testify to the conclusion that, at the very least, God is imprisoned in a dead language, if not so much dead. It all seems to be confirmed by the fact that since the previous census, 30% of the population, and the number is growing, ticked what has now become the first box of the 2016 Census: "No Religion".

Both our texts, of course, are rich and colourful metaphors. The striking imagery of the Exodus text was the only way that the Hebrews could think to express the ineffability of God: not a face as a beginning, but only the back after the event.

We might have learned something from these our forebears, not least that even the glory of God is too incandescent an experience for myopic human eyesight, such that the cleft of a rock and a covering is required until - let us be clear about this - *until God has passed by*. While the world's history unfolds, the backside of God, not the face, is the only human possibility. We hear that that is all that the people of Israel were promised, and for them that was more than enough. God as a hint in history was sufficient, whereas all that the culture has left three thousand years later is at best the headline question: "Is God dead? Or, at worst, the statement "God is dead".

We have just sung "*Immortal, Invisible, God only wise*" which has been our Western way of saying the same thing as this ancient text - namely what God is not: not subject to death, not visible, not accessible and so on and so on. Much more will soon need to be said, of course, but with our Hebrew forebears we start only with the back of God not with the face.

The point is that whereas the reality of the God of the Exodus is entirely positive, these intriguing images now have an increasingly negative character. We live in a day when what was a majestic safeguard to Moses: "*You cannot see my face and live, for no-one can see me and live*", has now become a self evident commonplace. What if in the 21st

century we read this text **not** as safeguarding the *majesty* of God but as the narrative of the sad *demise* of the history of God over the last two thousand years? Of course there have been occasional brief moments of illumination – one thinks of Thomas Aquinas in the C12, of Martin Luther in the C16, of John Wesley in the C18th and of Karl Barth in the C20th. But otherwise we have experienced the last two millenia pretty much as the passing by of the glory of God, while we have sheltered in the darkness of the cleft of a rock - until now it is virtually too late. We can presume that from God's side we are still covered by his hand, but for an apparently increasing number of our contemporaries, God has well and truly "passed by" leaving only a rumour of his past traces. They conclude, either sadly or triumphantly, that God has taken away his hand, so that all that the culture is left with is the residue of an absent deity. Western culture is indeed living in the cleft of a rock.

It is possible to assume that all this is an exaggeration. But let's rehearse the sad religious history of the West and its prevailing domestication of God. Think again of what we have done with God. God has been used to fill gaps when human knowledge was lacking; God has been used to solve, or more likely to fail to solve, admittedly real, but nevertheless contrived problems – earthquakes, tsunamis, cancer and the like; God has been used to accommodate our projected human needs powerfully exposed by Sigmund Freud; God has been used to solve the problem of insurance claims; God has been used as a mascot to accompany crusaders; God has been forced to adorn the belt buckles of German soldiers, "*Gott mit uns*", to accompany the opposition's rally cry: "For God, King and Country". God is presently required, though not for much longer, to open Parliament in what, in an ever more shrilling mandate, is an avowedly secular country.

This is the God who has come to an accelerating end in our day.

I have recently been given a book about the life of one of the most effective Anglican chaplain at Gallipoli in the First World War. It tells of a constant request for his services in the trenches in the middle of battles, usually the Eucharist. It tells of the request of soldiers by the thousand wanting Church parades. Remember, this is only a hundred years ago. What I found most remarkable of all was this statement of the Commanding officer to his fellows: "*The most important officer we have is the Chaplain!* And why? Because for the military machine he was there, not to perform religious duties, but "to build up morale", to "endorse battle strategies". Surely here is the most telling illustration of the eclipse of God in the guise of God. But the really sad disclosure was that this brilliant selfless chaplain, who put himself on the front line over and over again, mostly burying corpses, survived the war only to become an agnostic. Why sad? Perhaps because he accepted his role as a "morale booster". It is a puzzle how a priest ordained to a ministry of a bloody crucified Lord could not see the connection between the Lord of his calling and the grisly fate of young men sacrificed to the war machine.

I speak as the son of a father who was seriously wounded at the third battle of Ypres, and who later sought ordination *precisely because* he saw the congruence of Christian faith and the catastrophic human misery being played out, of which he was a part.

Well, so much for the death of God in our culture.

But what of Paul this morning? Here not the backside of God, but now the face. Yet even here, things are not as straightforward as we tend to presume. I imagine it likely that you can call to mind an especially significant personal biblical text. This is mine, for this reason.

Twenty five years ago I joined a bus tour travelling from Athens to Corinth. Greek light is intense, so naturally our guide reminded us that Apollo was the Greek god of light. A little further on, she told us that Diogenes, a famous philosopher of the day, lived in Corinth. A contemporary of Plato, whom he loathed, Diogenes embodied the Hellenistic ideal – “to know the self”. To that end, he repudiated all the paraphernalia of civilised society, and lived in a barrel - actually it was a large amphora - with his dog, a *kynikos* in Greek, our word *cynic*. Now Diogenes preceded Paul in Corinth by four centuries. Why am I telling you this? Because only knowing this background will you understand what Paul is doing in this text, or indeed everywhere. Hear him this morning:

“*God who commanded the light*”: implication: ‘light’ is not a deity as the Greeks embodied it in the figure of Apollo, but now light is merely a player in nature. Light can be commanded: “*God who commanded the light to shine out of darkness - then this - has shone in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge, not of the self, as Diogenes advocated was what the pursuit of knowledge was all about, but now the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.*”

See how Paul creeps up on the sacred mystery. It is bracketed all the way. Not God as a problem solver, a need fulfiller, a gap filler, but the only God there is. Here it is for the first time – now not the backside, not even its veiling, but the very **face** of God.

Putting all this together twenty five years ago, which from the guide’s side was merely inconsequential information, I wept – tears not only at this stunning revelation of Paul’s brilliance, but equally that I had wasted half a life time in ignorance of what this text has transformed: no longer “*No-one can see my face and live*”, but precisely its denial: “*the light of the knowledge of the glory in the face*”.

I hope that this revolution might be something for you too.

Because the truth is that for the coming days, all we have to do is to live with Paul in this miracle of light, and tell the darkening world: *this* is God.
