

Sunday next before Lent 2013

There are some readings that seem to crop up in the lectionary several times a year and one such is the transfiguration. I wondered about pulling out an old sermon and seeing if you noticed and then I was reminded of the story of a Vicar who preached a rather good sermon on serving one another, and then the following week preached exactly the same sermon again. People wondered over coffee whether to say anything, but thought, no, we don't want to upset him. The next week, he preached the same sermon again. They began to think 'Uho, he's lost it', but still no-one said anything. When on the fourth week he gave them word for word exactly the same sermon, they decided the time had come to talk to him.

'Yes', he said, 'I know. And you will get the same sermon every week until you show you have listened.'

But as you always listen, I won't repeat my last sermon on these readings.

In fact, what fascinated me this time upon reading them, was the veil that Moses wore and the way in which St Paul interprets this.

Moses takes off the veil when speaking to God, and then puts it on again when he comes back among the people, and the setting of all of this is the giving of the ten commandments. There isn't much explanation given, but it is as though Moses is protecting the people. The shining of his face is too bright, too strange, too alarming perhaps. He is protecting them as one might provide special sunglasses for people to use when looking at an eclipse of the sun. Getting too close is a bit risky, a bit dangerous. They weren't ready for it.

Paul uses a very different argument and one that is quite hard to follow. He says that the veil was worn to hide the fact that the glow on Moses face would fade, just as the light from the law had faded. He says that Jesus is the light and that an evangelist such as himself can provide light that does not fade and can remove the veil from our minds.

Whilst logically this doesn't really follow from the Exodus reading, it nevertheless provides useful insights into what prevent us seeing the glory of Christ. In Paul's mind, in this particular situation that he finds himself in at the church on Corinth, it is the law that creates the barrier, that prevents people seeing the truth of Christ. That is not true for us. Our situation is quite different.

Yet a veil certainly can be there - a barrier that stops the light from reaching us. And what is more, it is a veil that we put there ourselves. No-one else has a hand in it.

I think we do it for two reasons.

Firstly, because otherwise we get distracted from what we want to do. My office gets the afternoon sun, which is lovely, and fairly rare, particularly this time of year. At one point in the afternoon I will almost certainly have to draw my curtains if I am working on my computer. Otherwise I can't see the screen. Much as I love the sun, it is preventing me from the task I have set for myself.

We are busy all the time. We have our paid job - if we are lucky. We have the housework, the shopping. Nice things too: books to read,..... tv to watch,..... clothes to buy,food to eat,friends to meet,internet shopping, , tennis or golf to play. It fills the day. If we didn't draw the curtains, put on the veil, this might get interrupted by thoughts that remind us of other things we might do: praying, visiting someone who is lonely, buying food for someone who can't afford it, giving money to charity. So we keep the barrier in place.

As we approach Lent, and are maybe considering doing something for Lent, perhaps we could think about allowing ourselves to be distracted in this way - to let the light shine. You have a Lent envelope for the Bishop's Lent call, which supports projects in our link Diocese in Zimbabwe, projects in the Holy Land supporting orphans, and also local projects in this Diocese, including Sparkfish, which works in schools, The Furzedown Youth Centre in Wandsworth and the Sydenham Garden. So if you are giving up, for example, wine, for Lent, why not put aside the money you are not spending on wine and at the end of Lent bring back this envelope with an offering to the Bishop's Lent Call. It all helps to remove the veil.

But there is another reason that we put this veil across to hide the light. It is similar, but not quite the same. Using the same analogy of the light on the computer screen, what we see is the dust and smears and spatters – how do they get there? Once you see it, you have three choices: clean the screen, ignore it and carry on, move the screen or drawn the curtain so that you can no longer see the dirt. Actually it is far worse than that. It is more akin to moving the oven and seeing what lies behind it. You either have to very quickly move the oven back, or you put on the marigold gloves and get scrubbing.

We all of us lead imperfect lives. We kid other people and ourselves about our motives. We hurt the people around us. We are occupied with self and don't notice the collateral damage that it creates. We take people for granted. If we were to let the light right into our core, we would have to face up to all of this mess. We would have to make a decision either to clean up, or ignore the mess.

St Paul is right in this context. We are supposed to have renounced the things that one hides. By continuing to put up this barrier we are missing out on seeing the wonder and the splendour of the glory of Christ. We need to be honest with ourselves about this.

Would we deliberately shut our eyes to a beautiful sunset? Actually, the truthful answer is yes we might. We might say later, not now I'm busy. Would we deliberately shut out friendships? Yes, if we become obsessed with something else, whether that be alcohol, or work, or a new relationship.

And we deliberately prevent ourselves from seeing the glory and the splendour of Christ, and we are missing out.

So as we come near to Lent, let's use the 40 days of Lent to open our eyes, remove the barriers, see the love and the beauty that surrounds us, and the pain and suffering too, and let the light of Christ right into the centre of our being. Maybe it's time for a spring clean. Amen.