

## Quinquagesima 2019 (Year C)

I am sure that many of us will have had mountain top experiences of various kinds. Many years ago, I was staying with a German family over New Year, and one day we visited their relations who lived in the Austrian Tyrol – a little town called Tannheim. It was all very picture-postcard, with deep snow on pretty buildings. Whilst we were there, I was taken up on a ski-lift to the highest point where from which skiing took place, although I seem to remember being rather inappropriately dressed rather than wrapped up warmly! However, what I do vividly remember was the sight across the Austrian Alps. It was magical and mysterious, with the bright sun shining on peaks and frozen lakes as far as the eye could see and beyond. I confess that I have a fantasy of one day spending the New Year in the plush central hotel in Tannheim, although sometimes it is perhaps best to leave memories as they are!

Today we are encompassed in light with Luke's mysterious account of the Transfiguration – and for us a last burst of glory before the liturgical disciplines of Lent. However, in considering the vividness of this account, I think that it has much to teach us not just about Jesus, but also of our own identity as Christians as we view the reaction of the disciples. In this respect, the vivid Transfiguration event, whilst being one of several confirmatory turning points in the Gospel for them (particularly for Peter James and John), points us not just to Easter, but beyond - to the fulness of the Christian life lived in the Spirit.

Unusually, both New Testament and Gospel readings are intimately linked to the imagery of Moses in the passage from Exodus, who, coming down the mountain with the second tablets of the commandments is so transfigured by his encounter that his face shines in the reflected glory of the Divine Presence, and although he draws the frightened people to him to share in this light, he subsequently veils his face. It is an extraordinarily vivid image.

The passage from Corinthians is essentially a commentary on this passage, but into this radiance enters what seems a note of discord. Paul uses the imagery of Moses' veil to say that Jewish people remain veiled from the words of the Law. When we bear in mind the horrors of the Holocaust and the current appalling rise of anti-Semitism on both the hard left and extreme right of politics, this discordance is heightened for us. Quite rightly so. I think that it is necessary to explore this passage further and not just bathe ourselves in a self-satisfied holy smugness of thinking that the account of the Transfiguration promises the possibility of transfiguration only for Christians, which seems to be what Paul.

In fact, he goes on to qualify this as he says: *'And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.'*

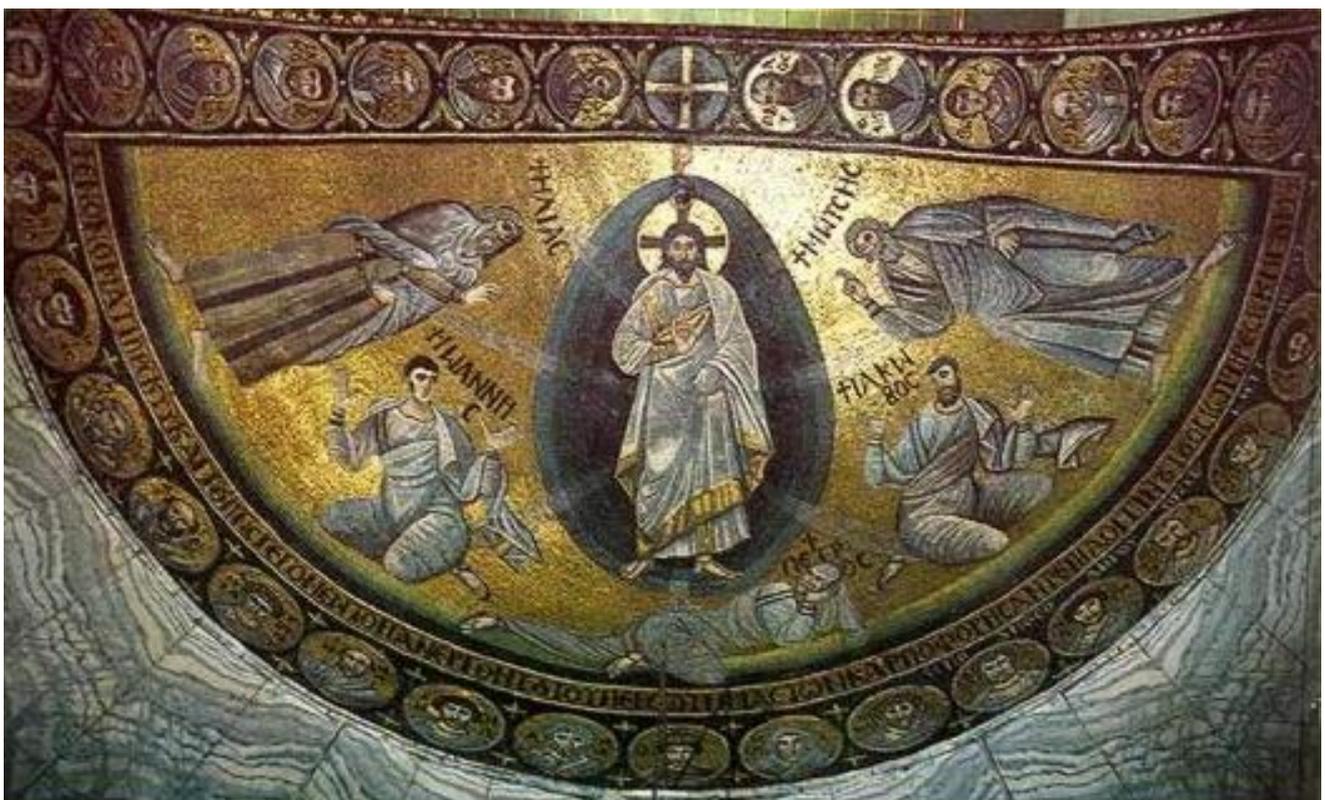
Does this make the situation worse? Rather, I think that Paul is opening for us the knowledge that we are all capable of veiling our minds to reality, within in everyday life, and certainly in our Faith journey. He makes this even clearer in other passages within his letters, illustrated as he shares his struggles grappling with issues of his upbringing in the face of making sense of his new life in Christ. He acknowledges that we, as brothers and sister in Christ, are not the prime movers in living and revealing the Gospel light. Whilst

the passage might reveal his frustration at his oratorical powers not moving all those he is trying to draw to the Good News of Jesus Christ, he realises that ultimately the indwelling of God in all people, together with the free will each person bears means that it is the individual response to the call of God within lives which draws people to faith.

*For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. 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. But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.*

I fear that I have dwelt on the New Testament reading to the exclusion of the Transfiguration itself. For me, the Transfiguration should never be seen as a standalone event of spiritual confirmation for Jesus, or indeed of smugness for the Christian, frozen like the mountain lakes I viewed in the Alps. This is because it is intimately linked to the passage that follows in all three Gospel accounts; where heavenly glory is supplanted by a vivid scene of the human experience of chaos as a father begs help for his mentally disturbed child. Seemingly nothing could be further removed from the glory of divine confirmation experienced by Peter, James and John on the mountain. Yet it is here that the divine light is needed most, and this is our call. Even in the face of faithlessness, hostility or even hatred, Jesus calls us to be both salt and light to the world, and this, to me, is where the Transfiguration has its fullest meaning.

Our Gospel call, no matter how faint or veiled we ourselves make it, is to bring the light down from the mountain top and into the dark places within the reality of every situation we encounter. This is our privilege – to reveal the dayspring from on high and to transfigure the lives of all we meet.



*The Transfiguration –mosaic in St Catherine's Monastery, Sinai c.540*

## **Exodus 34: 29-end**

29 Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. 30 When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him. 31 But Moses called to them; and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them. 32 Afterwards all the Israelites came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the Lord had spoken with him on Mount Sinai. 33 When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face; 34 but whenever Moses went in before the Lord to speak with him, he would take the veil off, until he came out; and when he came out, and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, 35 the Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining; and Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with him.

## **2 Corinthians 3: 12- 4:2**

Since, then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness, not like Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside. But their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside. Indeed, to this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds; but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. 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.

Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practise cunning or to falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God.

## **Luke 9 28-36 [37-43a]**

28 Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus[f] took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. 29 And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. 30 Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. 31 They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. 32 Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake,[g] they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. 33 Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, 'Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah'—not knowing what he said. 34 While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. 35 Then from the cloud came a voice that said, 'This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!' 36 When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

*37 On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. 38 Just then a man from the crowd shouted, 'Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. 39 Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he[j] shrieks. It throws him into convulsions until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. 40 I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not.' 41 Jesus answered, 'You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here.' 42 While he was coming, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. 43 And all were astounded at the greatness of God.*