

8 March 2009

Exodus 33.7-23, Lent 2

A sermon preached at St Andrew's, Chesterton, by Nick Moir

'Look at his face! Just look at his face!'

Football nerds will remember those words of Barry Davies commentating on Francis Lee who had just scored for Derby County against his old club, Manchester City, in 1974. His face said it all. It often does. The face tells the story, the face reveals the person. A portrait may cut off legs, hands, everything below the neck and above the forehead but what has to be there is the face.

A clergy mentor of mine was once seriously ill in hospital – and it became life-threatening when he was in the bath and, looking down, saw that the water had gone an alarmingly deep shade of red. He pulled the emergency cord and the staff came running. This was life-or-death so there was no time for niceties. He was bundled onto a stretcher without as much as a fig leaf for cover and wheeled straight to the operating room. Critical though his condition was, my vicar friend was also acutely aware that he was even more exposed to the public gaze than he was usually accustomed to. The only cover he had was his hands and he was quick-witted enough to use them to cover his shame in the most instinctive way – by placing them on his face.

His instinct was an ancient one. In Massaccio's haunting fresco of the expulsion of Adam & Eve from Paradise in the Brancacci Chapel in

Florence, Adam's hands are both shielding his face, leaving the rest of him fully exposed to human view. For a later generation this was too much and a figleaf was supplied to restore modesty and there it remained for over 300 years until restoration in the 1980s once again revealed all, as they say.

Except of course it didn't, because the really important revelation lay not down there, but up in Adam's face – and that we have never been allowed fully to see for shame seeks to conceal and to hide. I notice this in my children when they have been naughty. They look down and away from me; somehow their face is concealed by shoulders and arms, frowns and shadows. They will not look at me; we no longer speak face to face. But when threatened with the loss of privilege they look at me again, imploringly, and if I am not convinced that they are sufficiently sorry, I instinctively look away and will not engage. I hide my face.

When walking and riding through the Sinai desert three years ago I ascended two mountains. One was Mount Serabit. The track is steep, hard, but well-worn. In the days of the ancient Egyptians and Hebrews it was the way up to a series of mines where they extracted the most valued of jewels in their day, topaz. So this was a place of hard slave labour but also of romantic pilgrimage. The ruins of a temple adorn the summit; it was dedicated to Hathor, the goddess of love. You can still see carved in stone two depictions of why pilgrims went there– in one the pilgrims are seen bringing their gifts, their prayer is to find love and happiness and to seek blessing in it; the other image is of the goddess

herself. Attuned as I am to the Hebrew revulsion towards images of gods, idols, I was expecting something vaguely grotesque. But the face they came to see is rather lovely and benign. You can imagine those hot-blooded Egyptians returning from their love pilgrimage ready to go a-wooing with a spring in their step and some much desired gems in their pockets.

Hebrew religion, however, was distrustful of the cult of the eye. The God of Israel would not so easily be seen. 'Seeing is believing' is the very opposite to Old Testament faith where Israel has to learn to believe without seeing; indeed, it is as though 'seeing' would actually damage, diminish even destroy what faith is all about. The greatest figure of faith in the Old Testament is Moses. In our Old Testament reading he desires to see God. It is understandable; much has been expected of him in terms of leading his people and it is far from obvious that he is leading them anywhere other than into a long sandy cul de sac. The people are intermittently mutinous and leadership is costly and demanding. The Egyptian deities from which they had fled were not so shy about revealing themselves; they had beautiful images, inspiring faces. But even Moses' desire to see is only half fulfilled; for on the second mountain that I ascended in the desert, Mount Sinai itself, an extraordinary scene is described in which Moses is allowed a glimpse; he is placed in a cleft of the rock and the glory of the Lord passes by, but Moses is not permitted to see the divine figure approaching, his eyes are covered, but can see only as it passes away: 'you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen.'

Now at first this seems puzzling because earlier in the passage it says that 'The Lord spoke to Moses face to face as one speaks to a friend.' Some scholars suggest that we simply have two contradictory traditions here side by side, but I'm not sure that whoever edited this would have been quite so blind to the problem. I think the earlier part of the narrative already contains the tension, for although it says that the Lord spoke to Moses 'face to face' there is no divine face doing the talking: 'when Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent, and the Lord would speak with Moses.' What does the talking is a pillar of cloud. Now what we call a cloud when it's up in the air we usually call fog when it's at ground level. And fog is what stops you seeing. You may speak face to face with someone in a fog but that doesn't mean you can see them.

So Moses may hear God but he cannot see and even when he is allowed to see, it is only a fleeting glimpse.

So Moses and his people had to learn to know God without seeing; to learn to be satisfied with brief, tantalising glimpses of the divine. What this meant was that 'face to face' had to become metaphorical, and vision – seeing – internalised. So when they ascended their temple mountain on pilgrimage and took their gifts, they (unlike their Egyptian cousins) had no face to see. Their god was less visible and in that sense more out of reach. It was less easy for them to return home feeling that their god had smiled on them for they couldn't see it. And yet part of

the temple ritual would have been to receive a priestly blessing, the text of which is recorded in the book of Numbers:

‘The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.’

In the religion of Israel, worshippers were blessed; they did experience the graciousness of God, they felt that he was smiling upon them. But they could not see it; it had to be internalised. Judaism thus became a deep faith, one which developed the inner world, the spirit and soul. It was a faith that experienced a god whose face sometimes seemed to be smiling on them, but sometimes seemed to be turned away from them. So the psalms include celebrations of God’s life-giving presence but also laments about his puzzling absence.

‘Like as the hart desireth the waterbrooks, so longeth my soul after thee, O God.’ They were a people who had come from the desert: not just in the 40 years in the wilderness, but in the wanderings of their forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob whose semi-nomadic quest for food and water reflected a deeper spiritual quest for the Presence of God. ‘My soul is athirst for God, yea, even for the living God. When shall I come before the presence of God?’ Their god was in some ways more elusive.

And that is true in a way for us Christians too. The Promised Land must wait; in this life we are, as the hymn says, pilgrims through this barren

land, with moments, wonderful moments of being overwhelmed by the Presence, deeply and intimately aware that God is with us and that our quest is not in vain, but then other times, if we're honest, when we cry out with the Psalmist 'When shall I come before the Presence of God?' and our souls long for him, for that day when St Paul promises us, we shall see him 'face to face'. But that very yearning is a pointer to what is to be, to the land of promise that awaits us when we have learnt the ways of the desert.

Francis Lee was near the end of his career in 1974. Scoring on that day was the glorious climax of his career. When Barry Davies looked at his face, he saw something so glorious and heavenly that his voice broke almost into falsetto: 'Look at his face! Just look at his face!'

Heaven indeed. And worth waiting for.