

Introduction to Epistle Reading: 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2

Over the years passages such as today's Epistle reading have been misused to justify a Christian sense of superiority over the Jews. The risk is that it is entirely possible to read this passage and think that we Christians replace Jewish people as the covenant people because we read the Hebrew Scriptures "correctly." This understanding interprets the whole of the Hebrew Scriptures as being fortune-telling about a future of Christ. However, this is not how it was understood by Paul who used the Jewish tradition of midrash to interpret the scriptures for his day. In writing today's Epistle reading, Paul is not writing to the Jewish leaders, or even the leaders of the local synagogue. Rather, he is writing to Jewish-Christians who thought that people had to keep the Torah in order to be Christian. As we listen to how Paul reinterprets today's story from the Hebrew Scriptures for his time, may we listen to the challenge for us in how Paul's critique against members of the church in Corinth might apply to us today.

Reflection: Exodus 34:29-35

The Sunday before Lent starts is the Sunday we hear the story of the Transfiguration. There are many reflections that I could do with that story, and you have probably heard many different explorations of it over the years. However, this year as I was reading, it was the Old Testament reading that caught my eye.

When, according to the book of Exodus, Yahweh makes the covenant with the people of Israel, Moses trots up and down Mt Sinai/Mt Horeb no fewer than seven times. These, of course, were just the latest hikes up the mountain, having been there on previous occasions, such as when he saw the burning bush. Throughout this book of the Bible, Mt Sinai/Mt Horeb is seen as a place of divine revelation. On this occasion, his trip up to that place of revelation is to cut new tablets with the commandments and to renew the covenant. This was necessary after the matter of the people worshipping a golden calf as a god, which they did on the previous occasion that Moses had been up on the mountain.

The story tells us that Moses interceded for the people of Israel – Yahweh had decided to destroy the people as punishment and set up Moses as a new patriarch in order to punish them for worshipping an idol. It therefore must have taken courage for Moses to leave the people again to trek up the mountain, perhaps wondering what the outcome would be this time. Did he trust the people to stay on the straight and narrow without him? What would happen without his leadership – would there be a repeat of the previous behaviours?

Nevertheless, Moses goes up Mt Sinai again and renews the covenant with Yahweh; he comes down and his face is shining (or horned, as an alternate translation of the same word). As we heard in our reading, Moses was not aware of the effect his conversation with Yahweh had on him, but those around him were afraid and so he veiled his face as a concession.

However, there is a reason why Moses' face shines after his latest encounter with Yahweh. Throughout the Exodus story, the glory of God is depicted as shining. There was an understanding that no mortal could see the face of God and live, but Moses in this encounter sees Yahweh's back once God's glory had passed by. Moses has had an encounter with Yahweh closer than almost anyone else in the biblical history. Quite simply, the shining face of Moses reminds us that we cannot encounter God and remain unchanged. When we see God, we start to reflect that image of God in our lives as well.

And one of the recurring themes in the Old Testament is that we are to be holy because God is holy. This is something that perhaps these days should be translated into different words. All too often being "holy" is equated with being self-righteous, and certainly there are groups of Christians who perpetrate that stereotype. However, when we look at the Bible stories and think about the many different commandments in the Torah, we see an understanding of God who is just, values the vulnerable, stands up for the oppressed – and calls the people to do the same. In short, we are called to share that same love that God has shown to us.

If we are also to reflect the image of God, as Moses did, transformed by our encounters with God, as Moses was, then we too are called like Moses to build a just society that looks after the poor, vulnerable, and oppressed. However, what this means in our society is going to look very different to what it looked like back in the days when this story was first written down.

I also think it's important to notice the response of the people to Moses' shining face – his reflection of the image of God. They were afraid and Moses accommodated that. We may not always have a positive response to sharing that love, but we can accommodate that and build bridges that enable others to experience it in some way, even if not in its fulness... yet.

Like the Israelites through the Exodus, we too are going through some turbulent times as a society. I wonder what it means for us to reflect the image of God today? Are there ways we need to soften what we do to enable others to be unafraid to approach God and experience the love that we also experience?

After the Gospel: Luke 9:28-43a

Quite some years ago I went to Tibet and travelled across the Tibetan plateau. In the distance, the Himalayans looked like small hills because I was already so high up. It is like this with mountain-top experiences. If we stay up there, we lose perspective of their grandeur; it simply is what it is. Eventually we have to come down again and experience real life.

Real life can be hard, awkward, leave us feeling incompetent. It has its challenges and we struggle. We might have a special experience of God on that mountain top, but we also recognise that God is present on the plain.