

Trinity XII

“Reflecting as a mirror the glory of the Lord...” (2 Cor.3:18)

The contrast between today’s two readings could not be much greater. The Epistle has no straightforward sense. Again we are thrust into this vast subject of the mystical interpretation of Scripture, Old and New. The Gospel, however, gives us (apparently) a basic and simple example of one of our Lord’s healings, although even this simple account would have had further resonance for the first hearers of this story.

They would – almost certainly – primarily have been put in mind of the rite of Baptism and its significance. The Baptismal actions were then described as both enlightenment and as the opening of the ears, an influx of grace through hearing (much as we find in today’s Gospel). One of the ancient Latin Rite’s Solemn Prayers (that came to be restricted to Good Friday) has for its introduction: “Let us pray for [those coming to baptism] that God would open the ears of their hearts....” Not perhaps the easiest of metaphors – “ears of their hearts”? – but we get the idea. Ancient forms of baptism, moreover, might use the same ceremony as was used on the tongue (as St. Mark describes). The ears too could be anointed.

Doubtless, there are some New Testament specialists of (what has been dubbed) the ‘myth and ritual school’ who think that what we have here in Mark is not an eye-witness account at all, but liturgical memories that have been ‘read back’ into our Lord’s ministry. This is unlikely (at least in this instance) simply because these are quite standard actions of healers of our Lord’s time, and the Lord was not unique in performing healings. The uniqueness lies in how carefully the Lord’s healings were recorded. It would seem that mere reminiscence (even less nostalgia) was very far from the purpose of the Gospel writers. Probably, their focus on what Christ once did came from their idea of precedent rather than mere record. What He is doing now, in His Church, amongst His redeemed is rooted in what He had done. He is opening the ears of the deaf and the eyes of the blind **now**. The Church itself carries on His healing work – physical and spiritual.

Christ is active amongst His chosen. This sense of immediacy and power, sadly, seems to have declined quite quickly in the Church, and it was to remedy this decline that all manner of revivalist movements have been launched over the centuries, with extremely mixed results. In no way should we sneer at such attempts, but we should not too readily seize upon supposed signs and wonders either. When performing any rite of healing, I have tried to insist that it is not the consciousness of the sick person that we want God to change, but that He will effect a full restoration of health. Nevertheless, our prayer may not be granted as we envisage. We are not performing magic, yet neither are we just a club for sermonizing! Revivalist movements are not wrong to aim higher than self-perpetuating religious observance, to seek to expand the restricted expectations of Christian exegetes and passive congregations.

If it is exegesis that we want, however, then today’s Epistle gives a golden opportunity. The original incident – to which St. Paul is referring – is curious enough. A cursory reading of Exodus 34:35ff. suggests that the Israelites were frightened, or uneasy, when Moses’ skin shone; entirely understandable. So Moses put a blanket over his head. Now, quite probably, we have been puzzled from time to time by Renaissance paintings and sculptures that portray Moses with horns. This too is rather off-putting! This derives from a mistranslation made by Jerome. He learnt Hebrew in his adult life, and then set about translating the entire Hebrew Scripture. The interpretation caused a row, but that is another story. One of the less happy passages is where Jerome translates ‘shining’ as ‘horns.’ Indeed the Douay-Rheims Bible perpetuated this absurdity: “the face of Moses when he came out was horned.” But don’t have nightmares, Moses never had horns. We also see a fulfillment of this image in the Lord’s Transfiguration, of course; where Moses is completely and decisively outshone.

So, staying with ‘shining,’ the rabbis – possibly as early as St. Paul’s time? – came up with a far more theological interpretation than that people were fearful. The point of the blanket was that it was not fitting that anyone should see Moses’ face **fade**, no one should see the diminution of God’s glory. A fine insight indeed. St. Paul seems rather less theological. He might even be making a rare foray into humour. He goes on to say, later, that those who failed to see Christ (those with whom he parted company) fail to read the Hebrew Scriptures because the blanket is still covering them, it lies over their hearts. It really is classic Jewish humor (and, no, as one bearing the name Silberman, I’m not being racist). St. Paul then delightedly expounds that only Christ can remove this veil.

He has equally strong things to say in today’s passage: “if the ministration of death written and engraven in stones was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not steadfastly behold the face of Moses for the glory of his countenance, which glory was to be done away; how shall not the ministration of the spirit be rather glorious?” When we read the first lesson in Morning or Evening Prayer, we do not necessarily think that we are recounting a “ministration of death.” This, nevertheless, is the centre-piece of St. Paul’s complicated account of how sin is known and introduced. He avoids, wherever possible, the role of the devil. Other Apostles might have much to say on this, but St. Paul seems uncomfortable about furthering any suggestion that there is a rival to God. Therefore, it is God who condemned sin in writings that God Himself prompted and gave to His people. Moses, therefore, stands between God and the children of Israel not entirely as a unifying figure but as a figure who, ultimately, represents separation from God (in contrast to the ministers of the New Testament, of whom Paul is the least – if not the least vocal!).

We rejoice, of course, in the way that St. Paul’s concludes this brief passage: “The Spirit giveth life...how shall not the ministration of the Spirit be rather glorious?” It is indeed the New Covenant with God in which we are walking, the Covenant ratified in Christ’s Blood and sealed by God the Holy Ghost. May we not irreparably grieve this Holy Spirit, may we never rest content with aiming low, may He ever be *our guard and guide, the rest most sweet* of God’s weary children, the One who cries out in our hearts “*Abba, Father.*”