

Moses' Veiled Face

Today's First Reading recounts how Moses was given the privilege to come into the special presence of God and how it caused his face to radiate with a special bright light as a result of that encounter. Moses has been up on Mount Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments - for a second time, by the way, since earlier he had shattered the two tablets of stone when he saw Israel shattering the commandments themselves by worshipping the golden calf. Moses has been face to face with God, and now, for the children of Israel, even this reflection of God's glory on Moses' face was more than they could look at with steadfastness. It may be likened to driving with the intense light of the rising or setting sun in one's eyes.

So Moses put a veil over his face to shield the people from the brightness . . . and also so that their appreciation of the God-given authority with which he spoke would not falter when the glow on his face would lose some of its lustre over time until it was "recharged" by another intimate meeting with God. In this and the other encounters mentioned beforehand, God is hidden and revealed at one and the same time. The light shines, but God must veil His glory so that the people will not be blinded.

No human can look at God in the fullness of His glory. Thus, God uses what Luther called "masks" to shield sinner-ridden humans from His unapproachable light. They give us glimpses of what we can understand about God but hide that which is too profound for us to take in. Luther speaks perceptively about God's revealed will and his mysterious ways:

Thus Christ says to Peter: "What I am doing you do not know now (Jn 13:7). You want to anticipate me and to teach me what I must do. You are making a big mistake. For it is your duty to bear and endure my hand. Let me do as I please. Afterwards you will know and understand what I have intended." . . .

This, then, is the way the saints are governed and the wisdom of the church of God, namely, that they are not scandalized by the counsels of God or offended by the face with which he meets us. . . . He is indeed the God of life, glory, salvation, joy and peace; and this is the true face of God. But sometimes he covers it and puts on another mask by which he offers himself to us as the God of wrath, death, and hell. . . . [T]his is done in order that you may be humbled, that you may endure and wait for the hand of the Lord and the revelation of his face. (AE 8:30-31)

It may take a while for people to see the Ten Commandments as a path to joy and freedom rather than bondage. It may have taken God's people time to see the outlines of the Gospel in the required sacrificial offerings and days to be observed. It most certainly was a challenge to see the hand of the all-powerful and loving God in the time of the bondage in Egypt. Moses and his message were given a hearing by the people because he was attested by signs and wonders. Through him, God had brought plagues upon the Egyptians, inducing them to let God's people go. And by God's power, Moses led Israel in the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea that finalised their deliverance from what was one of the most powerful military powers of that day - after the Israelites had surely imagined the Egyptians would slaughter them. God's people have always been called upon to walk by faith and trust rather than by mere human reasoning based on sight and current philosophies.

The Old Testament constantly points forward to the fulfilment of God's great plan of salvation in the promised Messiah. While the picture of God's plan of salvation is most clearly seen in its fulfilment in the person and work of Jesus, God's gracious and redemptive work is already there to behold in the Old Testament sacrifices and prophecies of God's spokesmen. Salvation has always been the work of our gracious God and fulfilled only through the atoning work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Moses wrote that God would not abandon His created people to be taken over by Satan and his evil angels, but that he would raise up a "*seed of woman*" (cf Gen 3:15) to overcome Satan (identified in Rev 12:9). That "*seed of woman*" was none other than our Lord Jesus, born of the virgin Mary.

So, while it often seems that the Old Testament covenant was primarily a promise that God would grant His people blessings as a nation in *this life* if they lived under His Lordship, that covenant was actually already shining brightly the light of God's *eternal* grace and love in Christ. Old Testament believers already had faith that God would raise them from the dead (Heb 11:17-19). Job, who belonged to the time of the patriarchs, beautifully expressed that faith that God would raise him from the dead when he declared familiar words, "*I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last He will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another*" (Job 19:25-27).