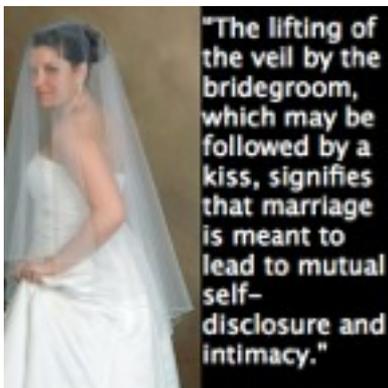


The Face of Christ

2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2

This time of the year is wedding season. Melbourne's often fickle weather is at its most benign. I conducted two weddings over the New Year, and have another just after Easter. One of the best moments in any wedding is the declaration of marriage. This is what the marriage service somewhat coyly refers to as "raising of the bride's veil." But everyone else knows that it's the couple's first kiss as husband and wife, and there's much joy and applause.

I've conducted well over 50 weddings over 20 years as a pastor. Many of the brides have worn a veil, but from memory none of them have worn it over their faces. It's a custom that has been disconnected from its historical foundations. No longer is it a symbol of the bride's purity and virginity, or protection from a groom trying to back out of an arranged marriage if he doesn't like the look of the bride. The bride, alas, had no such right to refusal.



"The lifting of the veil by the bridegroom, which may be followed by a kiss, signifies that marriage is meant to lead to mutual self-disclosure and intimacy."

The LCA's Marriage Service comments on this practice: "The lifting of the veil by the bridegroom, which may be followed by a kiss, signifies that marriage is meant to lead to mutual self-disclosure and intimacy."

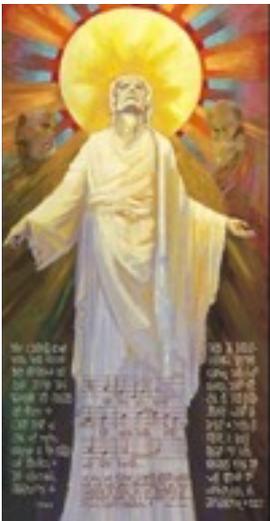
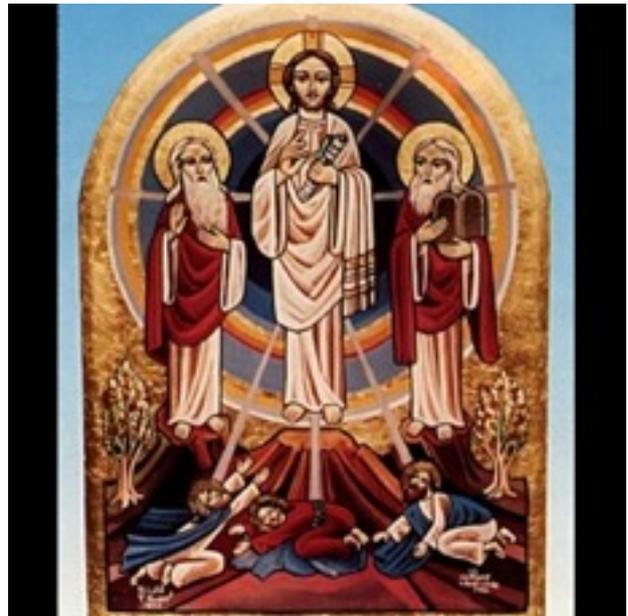
What we see today in Jesus' transfiguration is exactly what we've just heard explained. The veil is lifted on the glory of God in the person of Jesus. We see Jesus as

he really is; nothing is hidden. Moses experienced the same thing when he sat face to face with God, while God spoke the words of his covenant with his chosen people.

When all is said and done, Moses comes down from Mount Sinai, with the two tablets of the Ten Commandments in his hands. He's ready to share the news with God's expectant people. But they weren't so ready for him. They were scared of his shining, radiant face, which reflected the glory of God. A glowing Moses went ahead anyway and shared God's law with them, but when he was finished, he veiled himself to put God's people at ease. After all, the glory of God was a frightening thing.



Jesus' three chief disciples, Peter, James and John felt exactly the same way when they saw Jesus shining with the radiance and glory of God. "As Jesus was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning." This is God's Son, unveiled. And if this wasn't enough, they also saw Moses and Elijah, deep in conversation with Jesus about his upcoming exodus journey to Jerusalem and the cross. The disciples were shaken, bewildered and amazed. An encounter with the glory of God was both unexpected and in some ways unwanted. I wonder if Peter remembers his reaction when Jesus called him to be a disciple: "Get away from me, Lord. I am a sinful man!" I don't deserve your grace, your call, your love!



This, in a nutshell, is the miracle, not just of Jesus' transfiguration, but his incarnation as well. God's glory, his purity, his blazing love, is overwhelming. Human beings cannot stand in his presence. God knows that his natural state would destroy us. So he veils his glory in human flesh, in the person of Jesus Christ. God puts on a face we can look into, and in that face we see a burning love that was willing to take on our humanity, in order to heal the broken image of God in us.

The chasm between God and us is un-crossable, except for Jesus' cross. In the cross Jesus shoulders all of our sin, the many things that separate us from his Father, and faces God's wrath on our behalf. Jesus puts his glory on the line for us. This was always God's plan to change the direction of our lives. "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

When Jesus died, the heavy curtain that divided the most Holy Place from the rest of the temple was torn in two. The high priest could only enter the Most Holy Place only once a year, on the Day of Atonement. But now, through Jesus' death and resurrection, the curtain is no longer needed. The holy presence of God is on permanent display in the ever-living, ever-loving Jesus. What does all of this mean for us? "Brothers and sisters...we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body..." (Hebrews 10:19,20)



Paul puts it another way: "When anyone turns to Christ, the veil is taken away." Through the Holy Spirit's unveiling of our hearts and minds, we now know that our relationship with God is no longer one of fear and distance, but one of intimacy and mutual self-disclosure. We don't need to be afraid of God anymore. We don't need to hide from him, as Adam and Eve did after they had sinned. We can face him with confidence, and we can live in his

freedom. The veil has been taken off. We see God face to face. "We all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit."



I grew up in the western suburbs of Adelaide. In this area there were many Greek and Italian immigrants. I remember often seeing older woman wearing a black veil. They were widows observing a period of mourning the death of their husbands. Not only was the veil black, but there were also dressed in black. After a period of twelve months, the veil could be removed.

I think many Christians live their lives with a black veil over their faces. Perhaps they're not totally confident that they've been made right with God. Maybe they're looking their shoulders, just in case God is trying to sneak up on them and hit them over the head with a piece of 4 by 2. Or perhaps they still think that they have to get across the line with God by ourselves. Or that they

really don't need the grace and love that God offers, because they're good enough by themselves. Have you ever caught yourself thinking this way?

Do you need to hear again what Paul is saying today? "We with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory..." In Jesus, hear God loudly and see him clearly. Know that Jesus is God's Son, who he has chosen. Know that through him we have been chosen as God's beloved sons and daughters. Know that God's grace and Jesus' saving work wipes out our sin, for good. Know what this means for our lives: "We are transfigured much like the Messiah, our lives gradually becoming brighter and more beautiful as God enters our lives and we become more like him."



If we are inclined to write this off as too good to be true, or true of better Christians than you or I, remember who Paul was writing too: a fractured, divided congregation, people who so often failed to live up to their calling. How does Paul respond to them? He calls them back to the reality of who God has re-created them to be. He says to them: "Look in the mirror. Who do you see? See Jesus is you. See someone who reflects the glory of God, through the presence of Jesus in your life."



There are many exciting things happening at St. Paul's this year. If you have a look at the Ministry Expo, you'll see all sorts of way that we are seeking to shine the light in our congregation and in our community. There are many challenges and wonderful opportunities ahead of us too, as we grow into our place in the Box Hill community, and as each of us reflect the light of Christ's face in our context, in the simple and the ordinary things of life.

Jesus' transfiguration was over as soon as it begun. Next thing we know, he's back in the fray, healing a demon possessed boy, speaking of his journey to the cross, and setting his face toward Jerusalem. His glory is grounded in love. It's the same today. God's glory in us is

looking to love and serve others, and to bring the healing grace of God to all.

We're just about to begin our Lenten journey. This year we are using this season to deepen our understanding and practice of prayer. Prayer connects us to the heart and the will of God. May our prayers direct us to more clearly the lovingly act as the face of Christ to the world.

