

Brancepeth sermon
2 March 2025

2 Corinthians 3.12-4.2

Luke 9.28-36

Psalm 99

*Open our ears, O Lord,
to hear your word and know your voice.
Speak to our hearts and strengthen our wills,
that we may serve you today and always. Amen*

Often, when I'm preparing a sermon,
I go through the readings waiting to find out
what about them will make me uncomfortable.
It might be something that confuses me,
It might be something that challenges me,
but sometimes it will be something that makes me *wince*,
sometimes a little, sometimes a lot –
something that I find myself wishing wasn't there.

And I have to admit that was true this week,
when I was reading the passage from
Paul's second letter to the Corinthians that Carys read for us.

Now, don't get me wrong:
the 2 Corinthians text is in many ways a beautiful passage –
especially that line about 'all of us, with unveiled faces,
seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror,'
and 'being transformed into the same image
from one degree of glory to another.'

I *love* that.

Before we get to that line, however,
we have all that material about *Jews* having a
veil lying over their minds when they read the scriptures,
whereas *Christians* can see what is really there.

And that stuff *definitely* makes me uncomfortable.

Paul is recalling the story of Moses coming down off Mount Sinai,
carrying the two stone tablets with the law written on them,
and discovering that – as Exodus puts it

‘the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God.’

And ‘Aaron and all the Israelites ...

were afraid to come near him’

because the light of God was in his face.

And we are told that Moses wore a veil after that,

‘to prevent the Israelites being dazzled by the light
still shining from him.’

But Paul does something *very* odd with this story.

In fact, he does *two* very odd things.

First, he suggests that Moses was wearing the veil

not to keep the Israelites safe from a blinding light,

but to *hide* from them the fact that the light was fading.

And the second odd thing Paul does is that

he then flips the story round to say that

it is really the *Israelites* who are wearing

a veil over their faces – a veil that stops them seeing clearly.

And that, he says, is why they,
the Israelites – that is, the Jewish people –
can't now see how to read the Bible properly,
unlike Paul and his fellow Christians.

In other words, Paul has taken a story that lies
right at the heart of Judaism –
the story of the giving of the law on Sinai,
and of Moses speaking there with God –
and he turns it into a story about
the *incompleteness* or *inadequacy* of the Jewish law,
and about the *inability* of Jews to understand it.

You can perhaps see why this makes me uncomfortable.

It is important to remember the context
in which Paul was writing, of course.

The Christian movement of which he was a part
had started as one of many varieties of Judaism
jostling for attention in the first-century world,

and although it was slowly shifting
to become a majority Gentile faith,
its adherents were still engaged in live argument
with other varieties of Judaism –
arguments about which of them was true to God’s purposes.

And Paul, himself a Jew of course, spent a lot of time
in synagogues and other Jewish spaces
arguing this all out – debating with other Jews
about the scriptures they shared,
and about their differing ways of reading them.

And Paul and his movement were, at this point, still in the minority,
and the kind of playing around with texts that he does here –
this quite outrageous and polemical reversing of a familiar story –
is a move he made in that context for rhetorical effect –
trying to get a sceptical audience to pay attention
to the Christian way of interpreting scriptural stories.

So the kind of thing he says in this passage
has its place in the cut and thrust of that kind of argument –
an argument amongst *equals*, about how to read texts that they shared.

The problem is, however, that the
playful and polemical argument that Paul made
in that particular moment,
when he was in a minority, struggling to get a hearing –
well, it survived well beyond that context,
and it got taken, in time, to be a fixed and general picture
of Judaism, and of how it relates to Christianity,
when they had become effectively separate religions.

And that proved disastrous – indeed, it proved absolutely deadly.
It led Christians to see Judaism as fundamentally *outmoded* –
as the *old* way, overtaken by the *new* way of Christianity;
as having been *superseded* by Christianity.

It led them to view their own faith, Christianity, as
the *new improved* version of Judaism –
and to think that, once you have the new improved version,
you really don't need the *old* version any more.

And if you don't need Judaism, then you don't need Jews;

and so Jews became, in most Christian eyes,
a problem, a leftover, an alien presence –
a people who didn't really belong in the new world
that Christians ended up building
when the power of the Roman Empire became theirs.

Now, there's a lot I could say about this attitude,
this tendency of Christians to see Judaism
fundamentally as a *veiled* and *fading* religion,
as an outmoded and unnecessary religion.

I could easily fill a whole sermon with
the horrendous effects that those ideas have had –
the way they stoked Christian hatred of Jews,
and helped generate centuries of Christian murder of Jews.

But the main thing I want to say about all of this
is something I can actually say very quickly,
because what I want to say is simply:

No! Don't think like that!

Don't think of Judaism as outmoded or obsolete
compared to Christianity!

Don't think of Christianity as having superseded Judaism!

Don't think of Judaism as the *old* way and Christianity as the *new*!

Don't think of Jews fundamentally as people who have
refused to move forward into Christianity,
or *stayed behind* in a Judaism that shouldn't really exist any more!

To paraphrase some things that Paul said elsewhere,
when he was more directly facing the question of
the place that Judaism, and the Jewish people,
continued to have in God's purposes:

Remember, he said, that

God made promises to the Jewish people,
and *God always keeps God's promises.*

God's *promises* have not become outmoded;

God's *promises* have not been left behind;

God's *promises* have not been superseded.

And so *the Jewish people* are not outmoded;

the Jewish people has not been left behind;

the Jewish people has not been superseded.

God made promises to the Jewish people;
and God always keeps God's promises.

How that is meant to work out,
what it means for Jewish people,
– well, that's between Jewish people and God.

And the way Christians have treated Jews over the centuries
means that we long ago lost the right
to say much more than that;
we long ago lost the right
to tell Jewish people where they fit into God's plans,
what their faith means, or, worse, what their *lives* mean.

So that's my first main point in this sermon:
God made promises to the Jewish people,
and God always keeps God's promises,
and it's not for us Christians
to dictate what that means, or how that's meant to play out.

And so words that it might have made sense
for Paul to say in his context –

words about veils, and about fading,
and about an inability to read the text of scripture truly –
well they're not words that *we* should draw on
when, in our very different context,
we want to say anything about Judaism,
and about Jewish people.
So just ... don't go there.

But that's a negative point,
and I don't want to leave things there,
so let me turn it round to see the positive side.
When Moses and Elijah appear beside Jesus
on the mountain of the transfiguration,
I don't think we should see that as a sign that they
are there to hand on the baton
from Judaism to Christianity,
marking the transition from an old religion to a new one.
It's not a sign that *their* time is over,
and that a new time has begun.

Instead, I think we should take it as a sign

that means almost the *opposite* of that.

I think we should take it as a sign of God's *unwavering faithfulness*.

It was a sign that said that the *same* God who was speaking

in the giving of the Jewish law

and in the sending of the Jewish prophets

was also speaking in Jesus –

and a sign that the *same* God who

was speaking in Jesus

was also the one who spoke in the giving of the Jewish law

and in the sending of the Jewish prophets.

God hadn't abandoned God's promises;

God hadn't given up on an old plan,

in order to come up with a new one.

God on the mountain of the transfiguration

can be taken as saying that, even though it might look like

something dramatically new and unprecedented

was happening with Jesus –

Jesus' followers could be assured that *God was still the same God*.

God was still the God of Moses, the God of Sinai and the law;
God was still the God of Elijah,
the God of the prophets and the seers.

God does not change,

God does not give up on people,
God does not walk away.

And, as I've already said, I'll admit - I'll freely admit -
that I don't know how all this goes together.

I don't know how God's faithfulness to the Jewish people
goes with all that God has done in Jesus.

For that matter, I don't know how God's faithfulness to us
and God's call to us to follow Jesus,
goes with God's love for all people,
whatever their faith, and whatever their relationship to Jesus.

But I don't think I *need* to know.

All I *need* to know is that these things are in God's hands,
and that on the mountain of the transfiguration,

God showed us a glimpse of the fact
that those hands *never* let people go.
They are hands of unwavering faithfulness,
and we can trust in them completely.
And that's enough for me.

Amen.