

LAST BEFORE LENT – ST NICOLAS’S, ABINGDON
2 MARCH 2025



Exodus 34.29–35 / Luke 9.28–36

Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit – Amen

D' YOU KNOW THE WAY people often say that someone — almost always a woman — looks *radiant*? It may be her wedding day, or she may be pregnant, or it may simply be the perspective of a love-besotted viewer. But sometimes a person's appearance suggests that they're glowing, that light *pours* from them, in a striking manifestation of an *inner* condition of exaltation. We don't so often use this figure of speech about men; but here no other word will do. Moses spoke with God, and came down from the mountain looking positively *radiant*.

(I should at this point note for the record that the Hebrew in this morning's reading is ambiguous; it may be that Moses's face didn't *shine* so much as it *grew horns*, such as we see Michelangelo's *Moses* and in many other iconographic depictions of him. I'm staying with 'radiant' because, in the first place, St Paul took the verb in question as involving light; in the second place, putting a veil over horns would seem an imprecise way of remedying the problem of Moses's frightening visage; and finally, the prevailing interpretation in Judaic sources has been 'shining', and St Paul and generations of Jewish interpreters know their Hebrew better than I do. I checked in with an expert friend of mine, who assured me that there might not even be a difficulty, and that *he* understands the verb to mean that rays of light, like horns, radiated from Moses's face.)

Returning now to the lesson, Moses's face shone because he had just

spent forty days taking dictation from God, writing down the Torah with heavenly ink, and everything about that experience changed him, and *charged* him, with divine light. Especially, according to one midrash, when Moses had completed writing down the Torah, he wiped his pen on the hair of his forehead, and from this heavenly ink that cleaved to his forehead originated the beams of light that radiated from it. Don't try this at home.

The point of which reminds us that the Law is *no bad thing*, and that the Transfiguration of Jesus which St Luke narrates for us is not a diminution of Moses or the Torah, but a *sharing* in the attributes that marked Moses out as having been charged with the grandeur of God. Presumably Elijah would have glowed, too, if he had not wrapped his face in his mantle when he stepped out of the cave to see the LORD pass by. But in our Gospel lesson this morning, Moses and Elijah, the two prophets of Israel who saw the Lord from their cave on Mount Horeb, come along to the mountaintop again to demonstrate their unity with Jesus. Jesus isn't *against* the Law; the Torah is on Jesus's *side*. One could even imagine Jesus, Moses, and Elijah as a sort of superhero film team trio battling for truth, justice, and the way of the LORD, with guest appearances by David, Divine Wisdom, and a crowd of angels and archangels.

The reflex to think that the presence of Jesus means a zero-sum conflict *between* rival figures to whom one might pledge one's allegiance — a temptation to which most Christians have been subject, to the extent that it doesn't even seem possible that there be something wrong with that tendency — that temptation itself undermines our faith, and sets us at odds with brothers and sisters with whom we might more sensibly have strong ties of sympathy. The pivotal point of St Paul's vision of the way of the Lord involves Jews and Gentiles, women and men, slaves and free people, all together in a vast variegated throng of imperfect holiness, all rejoicing in God's grace that doesn't select out *this one* in the third row and *that one*

standing near the back, but which draws us toward a judgement in which all our sins be eradicated (*ours and theirs too*); a throng in which our impulses, our ingrained habits, our worst desires are revealed and *let go*, purified from us; a throng in which English and Irish and Welsh and Scottish *and* French and Italian and Lithuanian and Russian and Chinese and Ukrainians give themselves over to an ineffable harmony of praise to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Unlike Moses and Elijah, I have not been to that mountaintop — at least, not any mountaintop where I met and spoke with the Lord, though I have been to a mountain or two in my day. And I am not luminously radiant. A very plain, non-luminous, sea-level sort of person such as I, with *abundant* sins to my discredit, has no chance of getting to stand in a three-person selfie with Jesus and any prophet or king. That pinches at *little* bit now and then, I have to admit; but most of the time, I give thanks to God that I'm in the picture *at all*, even if I'm just a teeny dust speck in the vast mural of people from every people and language, tribe and nation, a kingdom of priests — that's you and me, all of us exercising *royal* and *priestly* ministry on behalf of God. *Who could ask for more?*

And although I'm not much to look at, in our unity *all of us* are resplendent in the glory of God reflected from our joyous hearts, *all of us* are redeemed from our dullest, ugliest sins, all of us are seen *on our good side*. We, united in one holy, catholic, and apostolic church, are all *radiant* brides of Christ. We, changed into the likeness of Christ, are *raised to the mountaintop* where we will bask in the pure warmth of the divine presence, where we join *together* with Moses and Elijah, Ruth and Rahab, Nicolas and Helen, Adam our first wayward father and old man John the Revelator, our last prophet, reflecting the glory of the Holy Trinity in all goodness,

✠ In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit —

Amen