

Truth and Superstition

Ex.34.29-end / 2 Cor. 3.12-4.3 /Mark 9.2-9

I worry sometimes about people who are not regular churchgoers dropping in to services, when they happen to come on days like today, when we have just heard two extremely strange stories – about Moses coming down from Mt.Sinai, where he has met with God, with his face shining, and making his people afraid because of it. And then in the Gospel, the equally strange story of Jesus' Transfiguration, when again, we have someone appearing to shine. Moses and Elijah also appear. You could excuse such people thinking 'if this is what Christians believe, they must be out of their tiny minds'. The modern mind-set might want to put these stories in the realms of science fiction, stories which are rooted in the imagination rather than in fact. But of course the writers of Genesis and the Gospels simply had not such category of writing. They either wrote stories or factual accounts. So these stories must have been intended as either one or the other. And indeed they have been read in both ways by good godly people. But for myself, I can't see why they should not be taken as 'fact' Just think for a moment: we sometimes say of people who are extremely excited or happy about something that their face 'lights up' when they talk about it. There *is* a shining quality of face that we have all seen in people at special moments. The talk of brides looking radiant on their wedding day is a legitimate way of expressing how they sometimes look. Now if a bride can be radiant, is it so surprising that Moses was absolutely shining after the only time we hear about when a man and God meet face to face?

And the point of Jesus taking Peter James and John with him on the mountain was to show them the fact that there was more to him than they had so far realised. They had understood so much, but there was still more to be discovered. So they see and hear things which shatter their small picture of Jesus. They see him shining. They see his 'glory' – a very important Biblical word.

It is no coincidence that these stories have similarities. God as light is a common theme - think of 'light from light' in the Creed, or 'God of God, Light of Light' in 'O come all ye faithful'. Some of the books of our own day in which people have described near-death experiences have almost uniformly talked of being aware of a great and wonderful light. These are not stories of the imagination, but attempts, albeit rough and ready attempts, to describe a reality.

But it raises the huge question of what we understand by truth. And maybe we make things more difficult for ourselves by the on-going irritating Christian habit of allowing superstitions to creep in round the edges of our faith. And where superstition comes in, faith goes out. For example there are plenty of superstitions associated with baptism - I remember being told our first child would never 'come on' until she had been 'done', and a Methodist colleague telling me that he had found someone pinching a baby at a baptism to ensure they cried, because otherwise they wouldn't know that the

baptism had made the devil come out of the baby. And this *was* in the c.20th not the Middle Ages! It is the same at weddings - lucky charms are often around - horseshoes are supposed to be lucky, or chimney sweeps (harder to get hold of these days - perhaps that explains why more marriages fail!) Bridesmaids have their origins in superstition. The theory is that the devil would want to spoil things for the bride, so the bride had decoys dressed just like her, so the devil wouldn't know which was the real one. Even Holy Communion has had superstitions attached to it. Fiona will shortly be saying the words 'This is my Body' over the bread. Because in the middle ages those were seen as 'the magic words' that made the bread into Christ's body, those very words began a magic spell. I don't have any real claims to fame – but I think I was the first person to celebrate a Sarum Rite Requiem Mass in Salisbury Cathedral since the Reformation. Maybe I am the only one! And I hasten to reassure Fiona that it was done with the express permission of the then Bishop of Salisbury. That service of course was in Latin, and so I said in the Eucharistic prayer 'Hoc est corpus meum' – 'This is my Body' and it is from those words that we get the expression 'hocus-pocus'. Superstition reigns!

Jesus said that he was the Truth, and that knowing the truth will set us free. In the New Testament reading Paul says it is by 'open statement of the *truth* that we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone.' It is a fact that people are often enslaved, they are not free, when they do not have the truth. That is the problem with superstitions. If you are superstitious, then you live life as if things which are not true, *are* true. Paul talked about people being enslaved to superstitions, to what he called 'the elemental spirits of the universe'. If you avoid walking under ladders, that might be very sensible, in that you might dislodge the person painting at the top of them, and might get paint on your head. But it is not sensible to avoid walking under ladders because doing so will bring bad luck. Some people are particularly prone to superstitions - actors for example. I remember having it drummed into me when I was in the school plays that you never said the 'tag' - the very last line of a play - until the first night. It would bring bad luck. And of course actors will never refer to Shakespeare's 'Macbeth' because it is unlucky - they always talk about 'the Scottish Play'. They are living as if something is true which is not true.

I believe we need to do two things, and learn to do them from being very young. The first is to have our feet firmly on the ground when we try to think about religion, about Jesus, about God. We are entitled to ask the most searching questions about everything. So something that appears at first superstitious or magical, supernatural, may turn out to be very matter of fact. We need to be humble enough to say we don't know it all. When we can't explain something, we don't have to assume that it is therefore supernatural and magic. It may simply be we don't yet know enough. We keep on saying we are discovering new things in science- but in fact they are not new - it is just they are new to *us*. Let me give you a famous example. One of the most important medicines of the last century has been penicillin. It is a mould that was first noticed by a Swedish scientist on some hyssop. When Sir Alexander Fleming noticed that this mould killed bacteria, being a good Christian, his mind went back to words in Psalm

51, which no doubt we will be using on Ash Wednesday. 'Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean'. Thousands of years ago, they used hyssop as a medicine. There were in fact probably using penicillin. The magic of the healing was actually totally scientific - but they hadn't found that out yet.

The disciples in the story didn't yet know everything about Jesus - and what happened in that story opened their eyes to what they hadn't yet understood. They knew how ordinary Jesus was - they spent day after day with him. They also needed to see beyond that, to see who he really was. There is a famous story of the conductor Sir Thomas Beecham seeing a woman he was sure he knew in the Midland Hotel in Manchester after a concert. He chatted about this and that, and then enquired after her husband, how he was, was he doing the same job? The woman replied very sweetly that he was very well, and was still King. Beecham knew he knew her, but he hadn't grasped who she was. They knew Jesus, but they had yet to grasp who he was. The events on the mountain opened their eyes.

There are many children who put belief God in the same category as belief in fairies. Maybe because that is the way they have heard adults talk. So when one gets discarded, so does the other. But to quote the title of an American book of prayers from the hip era fifty years ago 'God is for real, man'. He is not part of science fiction, or any other kind of fiction. And where we come to the limit of what our minds can cope with, we can go on worshipping with our hearts. We keep our feet on the ground, but allow our eyes to be open to what is not earth-bound. 'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy' to quote Shakespeare. Or to quote some favourite lines of mine from Elizabeth Barrett Browning:

Every common bush is afire with God
But only those who see take of their shoes,
The rest sit round and pluck blackberries.

May we be delivered from any superstitions that tarnish our faith. May God open our eyes to what is not obvious, to the truths which science goes on revealing to us, and be amazed by them. But may we also be amazed by the truths that can only come from openness to God. With such amazement, we can aspire, as Paul asked of us in the New Testament reading, to reflect the glory that we have seen in how we live. As we sometimes sing in the hymn 'As we gaze at your kingly brightness, so our faces display your likeness, ever changing from glory to glory, mirrored here may our lives tell your story.' May that be true for every one of us here today.