

New revelations of God?

If you were to reread today's reading from Exodus after Matthew's account of the Transfiguration, I hope you would be struck by the parallels. Moses and Joshua ascend a mountain to receive a revelation of God. The presence of God is indicated by the appearance of his shining glory and his covering cloud, out of which he will speak – a prospect which, a few chapters before, struck fear into the heart of the Israelites: *do not let God speak to us, or we will die*.

The Transfiguration illustrates twin concerns in our faith which are both necessary, but which can pull us in different directions. Pulling us in a conservative direction is the concern for orthodoxy: to be true to what we have come to understand about God and how he want us to behave; not to veer off the path in a deviant or undermining direction. But accompanying that is the need to be open to the Holy Spirit to receive new revelations of God, of whom our knowledge is always partial, and conditioned by human culture. Change in the world means we acquire new understandings and encounter new situations: we may need to adapt what we believe about how God wants us to live. A Christian response to slavery would no longer be, as we find in the New Testament, *obey your master*. The Jesus we encounter in the gospels said nothing about artificial intelligence.

On Mount Sinai, Moses, on behalf of the people, encountered God; who then gave his people the law: an understanding of the way that their relationship with God was to shape their living; something that became particularly important to them in exile. But on the Mount of Transfiguration Peter, John and James see Jesus shining with the divine glory; while the Father's voice declares Jesus to be the one to whom the disciples they represent should listen. For a Jewish believer, this is a new revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Yet the concern for orthodoxy, the desire for consistency with what has gone before is there not only in the correspondence with Exodus, but in the presence of Moses and Elijah: endorsing Jesus as the continuation of their faith and the fulfilment of their prophecy.

This year we have heard the Transfiguration read from the Gospel according to Matthew, from which most of our Gospel readings will come in this Year A of the 3-year lectionary. Most of today's words are not his: they are Mark's. The scholarly consensus is that Matthew is a later rewriting of the Gospel according to Mark, with additional material and for a different readership. There are passages where Matthew quotes Mark almost word for word; which makes it interesting when he chooses to differ. In his account of the Transfiguration there is only minor variation: adding *the Beloved* to God's words (as at Jesus' baptism) and making the divine voice the instigator of the disciples' fear, from which Jesus' reassuring word and touch lifts them. But I'm sure the Transfiguration would have been significant to the author of Matthew's Gospel, whoever that was (given his dependence on Mark's text it probably wasn't Matthew the tax collector and eyewitness). Unlike the Gentile Mark, Matthew the evangelist was almost certainly a Jewish Christian, writing, it appears, for a mainly Jewish Christian readership. Those who would recognise and respond to his creative indications of fulfilment of Jewish scriptures (think back to Christmas and *Behold, a virgin shall conceive*; or Holy Innocents and *Rachel weeping for her children, and out of Egypt have I called my Son*).

Matthew presents Jesus as a new Moses. Before we get to the Mount of Transfiguration, in Matthew's Gospel a new appreciation of the law has already been delivered by Jesus, from his seat on another mountain. With our keeping of Epiphany and the earliness of Easter this year we have missed several of the readings from the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus declared that he came *not to abolish the law, but to fulfil it*: something of concern to a Jewish Christian, brought up to love and follow the law – and possibly now excluded from observing some of its provisions by the developing rift between Pharisaic Judaism and the Jewish followers of Jesus Christ. As Jewish Christians had, perhaps tragically, to forge a new path away from the synagogue and alongside increasing numbers of Gentile believers, here again is that concern for consistency and continuity with the faith that had formed them.

At the General Synod of the Church of England last week, the issue which most poignantly illustrates these twin concerns is the accommodation, or not, within the Church of England of same-sex civil marriages. Led by the bishops, the Synod decided, for now, to go no further than what has already been provided for: mainly prayers of blessing, privately or within routine services, for same-sex couples. Standalone services of blessing, or permission for clergy to marry their same sex partners are not on the horizon. It is a vexed issue which divides the church at all levels and many will be feeling disappointed, hurt or betrayed. Given the Church's historical and current theological understanding of marriage as a union between a man and a woman, there are those of a conservative disposition who do not believe that this is a valid direction in which to go. On the other hand, there are those whose life experience (their own, or that of others close to them) convinces them that *those who live in love, live in God and God lives in them*, even if they are of the same sex; and that faithful lifelong unions are what God wants to see and his Church should endorse. That it hasn't is something our secular society won't understand or warm to. That's probably a clumsy summary, given the reality of many nuanced and sensitive positions, but hopefully you get the idea.

I mentioned the importance of personal experience. The witnesses to the Transfiguration were but three: Jesus chose Peter, John and James. Perhaps he was avoiding any sense of a publicity stunt, such as that with which Satan had enticed him at his temptation. In any case, he told them to keep the experience to themselves until after the resurrection, when others might be better placed to receive their testimony.

Living in Love and Faith (as the same-sex partnership process within the Church of England has been titled) has emphasised the importance of listening sensitively to the life experience of others, when that is different from our own. Within the Synod debate, the value of dialogue between those who held (and often still hold) opposing positions was stressed: it had enabled the agreements which had been reached; and no doubt lessened the careless use of language which can easily cause hurt and offence in such sensitive debates. But dialogue takes time and may only get you so far: a cause of frustration to those who want the Church to move further and much faster. And then there is that greater number of those who have not participated in that formal dialogue: which is most of us in the wider Church; and, even further afield, in the Anglican Communion, which is yet another factor in this debate.

Living in Love and Faith is the main subject for our Deanery Synod next week: I hope the Holy Spirit will be at work, enabling a sensitive and illuminating discussion. More widely, I hope that the Transfiguration assures those of a conservative disposition of the need to be open to new revelations of God and his will; and those who feel they have received such a revelation, of the need for the wider Church to be convinced that it is the voice of God they have heard. And that those with a story to tell don't have to wait too long for people to be ready, sensitively, to listen to their experience: we might find the glory of God shining from a new, unexpected place.