

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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VEILS

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Exodus 34:29-35
2 Corinthians 3:7-4:2

When you hear the word "veil" I wonder what image comes to your mind? Is it perhaps a bride's wedding veil, a long gauzy piece of material which cascades from the top of her head down her back, with, traditionally, a shorter portion which can cover her face? Is it one of these ladies' hats, perhaps seen at Royal Ascot or at posh weddings, which have a piece of net which hangs down over the eyes, designed to hide any signs of the crows feet or the ageing lines and creases? Worn veils tend to be decorative - and feminine - in our world.

But it was not so in earlier times. In the book of Genesis we read of Jacob marrying the wrong sister (from his point of view) because the veil which Leah wore was so thick, he really could not see which girl lurked underneath. And when Moses covered his face, so that the people would not be dazzled by the way it shone when he had been talking with God, it would not have been a wisp of gauze which he used to cover himself. It would have been something a bit thicker, possibly something like the veils which some Muslim women wear today, black, and with a place through which the eyes can look.

So when Paul talks of the glory of God's presence being veiled, in the face of Moses, or when Scripture is read, he doesn't mean that it is made more beautiful, or just slightly obscured. He means that the person looking cannot see God's presence, or that the reader can not perceive the meaning of what is read. Communication, which is what any human encounter or any written text seeks to do, cannot happen.

The glory of Scripture is that God communicates with us through it. I have in the past taken part in training elders and others to lead worship, and I have always told them that the most important part of any service is when Scripture is read. Not the sermon, when it is interpreted, not the prayers, when we speak to God, but the reading of the Bible, when God can speak directly to us. So it is important to do it well. God himself speaks to us when we read or listen to Scripture. He speaks to us in the words and through the words and around the words. When this doesn't happen, the glory of Scripture is veiled.

This week I had a chance to reflect on glory, truth, communication being veiled. In a meeting I was part of, Hamza Yousaf the Scottish government minister for overseas development, was invited to meet with the church's World Mission Council. He is young, pleasant, able and a good speaker. And yet he said nothing. He spoke all right. Words came from his mouth. He spoke for fifteen minutes and said nothing that wasn't already known, that he didn't know was already known. And then in a question and answer session, he spent many words in answering questions pleasantly, lightly, with anecdote, and taking five minutes to say what two words would have communicated more comprehensibly. I listened to him, and I marvelled at such a missed opportunity. Or maybe he had nothing to communicate, and this was his way of filling in the time, the politician's way.

It does not take lots and lots of words to communicate the gospel. As headline writers know so well, the best communication very often happens with fewer words. How many words does it take to tell people the good news that God loves you, that he sent Jesus to show it? Well, that was nine words. Nine words of glory. God loves you. He sent Jesus to show it.

Over the centuries the church has built up a framework of many more words to try to explain the truth, the glory, the gospel. Many words which had as their aim a desire to help people meet with the living God. But so many words have been used, that too many people think that it must be very complicated, far too complicated for them to understand, and so they needn't bother trying. And that is very sad.

It is sad on two levels. The first sadness is that people should be put off listening to Scripture, or listening to the gospel, and so never have that glory shine in their lives, never have the glory of having met with God shine from their faces. The second sadness is the sadness that is in the passage we read from Exodus. When Aaron and the people saw the shining face of Moses, shining because he has been in the presence of God, instead of being attracted, instead of asking how they could spend time with God themselves, they are afraid. They are afraid to come near to him. And so Moses has to cover his face with a veil. The veil is a relief to the people. The shining face of Moses is perhaps too much of a challenge.

There are people who would prefer to think that the truth about God is too hard for them. There are others who do not want to see that truth and be challenged by it. There are those who cannot bear to see glory in the gospel, in the church, in the lives of Christians, in Jesus Christ himself. And so they ask for it to be veiled, or more often, they hang up the veil themselves. They deliberately look for the inconsistency, and when we look expecting to find something, it is easy to believe that we have found it. However, some go further than that: if they can't find the inconsistency that they are looking for, the feet of clay they expect, in Scripture, in the life of Jesus, in the lives of his present followers, they simply declare that just because they can't put their finger on it doesn't mean it isn't there.

This week someone who lives in Newtonmore was talking to me about one of the church people. The person speaking said that she had never known anyone so purely good, so good through and through, without a mean thought or word about anyone, who speaks from the heart and always tells the whole truth. I expect you wonder if it was you - except the person who it actually was, who wouldn't think that way for a minute. What was being described to me was a person who radiates the glory of Christ. And there is more than one of them around. People notice how you live, how you speak, what motivates your actions. People notice and when it is there, they see God's glory. You yourself will not see God's glory in *your* life. You will see it in the lives of your fellow-Christians, just as Moses could not see the way his own face shone, and had to take it as read when the people remarked on it.

Paul, of course was talking to people who were a tiny minority in their city, a far smaller and unimportant minority than any congregation which can name itself as part of a Church of Scotland. Wouldn't Paul have been amazed - pleased too, I think - to know that in the future there would be churches in every part of every country in the Europe he knew, and even those parts, like here, which he would probably barely have heard of! Never mind the rest of the world, including a whole vast continent which had at that time never been imagined. Paul was talking to a very insignificant group. In that Greek city there were considerably more Jews than Christians, and they would have a measure of recognition and respect. But, said Paul, we have Jesus, and we have been given the Holy Spirit, to see at work in one another, and so we have the full glory of God given us.

I remember once meeting one of the Church's glorious eccentrics - and there should always be room for such people in the church. He looked round at the assorted group, from Scotland and the States that I was part of, and he said "I can see the glory shining from you. You are God's saints, you are the bringers of light into the world. You are those whom the angels will honour." And that is what I can and do say to you today. The glory of God is within you and among you and shines from you. And so..... When we read Paul's letters there is always an and so, or a so what. The so what, the practical point of this amazing truth is that we can act with boldness (v:12) and we do not lose heart (4:1).

Paul's point is that Moses was not bold. He gave in to the people's fear and put a veil over his face to hide the glory of God from them. We need not do this. Yes, there will be those who do not want to see the glory of God in our lives, or hear the glory of his love in our words, or acknowledge that it is possible that the living God could even be with us. But boldness does not need to mean brashness, and if the tiny

minority which was the church in Corinth could be free and open about the way that their lives were different, the way that their love was given them by God, the way that their motivations to live in love and service were rooted in God's sacrificial love for them, and his gift of the Holy Spirit; then how much more can we be open and bold.

It is not the big gestures, as we said last week, which attract the attention, so much as the daily habits of living. When I was young, I spent a summer as a volunteer in a Christian youth centre in Austria - a castle, actually - and one of the things I did daily was wash dishes, with a variety of the young guests helping dry. One day one of the guests asked how much I was paid. I told him - I think it was 27 schillings a week - about £3. And that was what got him. Why then did I do this, and why did I smile? And so, in my rather faltering German, I had the chance to explain that it was because I was motivated by God's love for me.

Now that I am a minister, I don't have the same opportunities to share as you do. Oh, I have other opportunities that come along with the role of minister, but people expect me to base my life on God's revealed love. But you, you have great opportunities. Most of the church is not the ministers. And the most effective agents of mission, of communicating the truth about God, of showing the glory, are not the high profile speakers, evangelists or ministers but the 'ordinary' Christians who live their lives and so change the world. When you think about it, it is really only common sense. There is a lot more territory outside church walls than there is within them. And we all spend the greater part of our lives outside church and church activities, interacting with the people God loves.

The challenge for Christians is not what we believe, but living it; being the church in environments which are sometimes hostile and at other times indifferent. It is precisely there, where you probably least expect it, that God's glory can be seen in you most clearly. It is a matter of heaven how we treat people, how we talk to and about one another in church, at home, or at work. Do we follow the individualistic trends of the society around us or do we commit ourselves to unity, community and service? What do we get excited about? What do we make time to be involved in? The mission of the church is not advanced by the rightness of our doctrine, or the correctness of our worship, but by the graciousness of our life as the body of Christ.

Moses veiled God's glory so that the people need not deal with it. But we are called to be bold and have hope as we live the life God's Spirit puts in us and leads us through day by day.