

THE VEILED FACE OF GOD

Quinquagesima

St Michael Cornhill

Sung Eucharist

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In 1887, two American scientists conducted what has been called ‘the most famous failed experiment of all time.’ It was the culmination of ten years work by one Albert Michelson and Edward Morley attempting to measure the speed of light within a gravitational field. How might the light be deflected or refracted? One of the key issues was so called ‘red-shift’ – how would that part of the light spectrum of electromagnetic radiation be affected? Now I’ll delve no more deeply into this since I may lose all of you – and indeed even myself.

Suffice to say that the results were not what they expected, and the rather extraordinary unpredictability would not be accounted for until 1905. In that year, looking back to the Michelson-Morley Experiment, and noting apparent irregularities in the orbit of Mercury around the sun, Albert Einstein produced his Special Theory of Relativity accounting for the apparent irregularities of the motion and behaviour of light; ten years later, he expanded this into the General Theory of Relativity, which incorporated gravitation too. So *the most famous failed experiment of all time* led to an amazing discovery.

There were three immediate implications in all this which revolutionised our understanding of motion, matter and light. First of all, it became clear that light can manifest itself both as a particle *and* a wave, *and* when one tries to measure it one cannot be certain of how precisely it will behave – will it appear as a particle or as a wave? Second, the observer’s own relative position and motion affect the result – hence the word *relativity*. Third, light and all other forms of energy and mass – that is the solidity of our world are interchangeable – hence the famous equation $E=mc^2$ – light equals mass times the square of the speed of light - and hence eventually the birth of a brave new nuclear future.

Now why in the heavens, have I begun here? Well, the answer is that it’s often assumed that as science has progressed so we know more and more about the universe in ever increasing precision. However, as I’ve hinted, the more we learn, the more complex and unpredictable it all is! For, at almost exactly the same time Professor Werner Heisenberg formulated his famous Uncertainty Principle. So, the more we seemed to know, the more elusive it all seemed to become! In all this, however, after it was often assumed that science and the Christian faith didn’t mix – even contradicted each other.

But today’s three readings seem to suggest almost exactly the opposite. For just as the scientific world feels elusive, so too Christian belief is rooted not in knowledge, but in trust - in faith. God cannot be corked into a bottle, measured with calipers or even investigated with an electron microscope. So, Moses comes down the mountain and as God speaks through Moses, his face is veiled.

Paul in that splendid piece from the Second Letter to the Corinthians expands on this: ‘Now, the Lord is Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of God as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.’ Paul uses this image of the mirror again in his ‘hymn to a charity’ or ‘to love’: ‘For now we see, through a glass darkly, but then face to face.’ In the Old Testament, too, we read: ‘Thou art a God who hidest thyself.’

As with the pattern we saw, then, in the development of science, it’s not that we cannot know God. Instead, again as in science, our knowledge of God comes in many

different ways, and most often God's face is veiled. Our attempts to describe God, then, always unavoidably use images, models. From the time of Jesus onwards images have been the key. Jesus in his parables describes God in just that way – *The Prodigal Son* or better *The Forgiving Father*, *The Good Samaritan*, *the Grain of Mustard* and so on.

In the earliest times of the Church some described God by allowing images to criticise each other – the so-called *via negativa* or apophatic theology – what could *not* be said of God. Other theologians affirmed images – but all allowed for a continued sense of unknowing. St. John of the Cross even spoke of 'the Dark Night of the Soul': God can seem far off at times. It is only in Jesus that we encounter a greater fleshing out of God and God's ways through a human being. So in our gospel reading today, Jesus is *transfigured*, the veil of mystery goes. God is there in Jesus in all his glory.

So, ultimately, much of what has issued from the development of scientific thought runs parallel with or even supportive of such an approach to God. Image piles upon image about the nature of God, but God is not trapped in human words. Each image only approximates, as in science, and one image modifies others.

On his deathbed, Thomas Aquinas, the greatest of all mediaeval theologians looked back on the millions of words he had written (or probably dictated to fellow monks) and reflected 'I count all this now as so much straw.' As we enter Lent, these are cautionary words. They encourage us to do three things. First to read more of God in scripture, in poetry, in prayers; second, to allow real time for a quiet – perhaps ten minutes a day – allowing our minds to clear; and third, to offer all this to God, to give God time. We shall not capture God, but God will capture our hearts.

Amen

Readings

Exodus. 34. 29-end

II. Cor. 3.12 – 4. 2

Luke. 9. 28-36.