

Sunday next before Lent sermon by Andrew 23 Feb 2020

Exodus 24: 12-end; 2 Peter 1: 16-end; Matthew 17: 1-9

Today is almost a festival of light before we enter the more sombre days of Lent, with the darkness of Golgotha even now before Jesus. This is the news he'll share with his disciples the very moment they come down from the mountaintop.

But right now everyone is shining. The face of Moses shines so brightly that he has to cover his face with a veil so his people can look at him without being dazzled, and I'm guessing even Peter and James and John shine with a kind of borrowed glory from this transfigured Jesus whose radiance and glory just knocks them off their feet.

As I was thinking about this business of shining faces I was reminded of Richmal Crompton's "Just William". William was a character from children's books when I was a kid – very naughty, always in trouble - and his face used to be scrubbed to an unnatural shine, I think with something like carbolic soap, so he could be made presentable for guests or made fit to send to a birthday party. Of course it never lasted long with William, whose shine wore off in very short order and he managed to disgrace himself almost the moment he walked out the door.

And the shine for us can be just about the same. St Paul gets converted on the Damascus Road in a flash of Light. Unforgettable and enough to change you to the very core, but Paul can still write years on: Wretched man that I am. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. So even Paul's still struggling with this. The shine seems to almost get rubbed off by my life in the world and all the stuff that's going on inside me.

So if shining is down to me, like scrubbing your face with carbolic or some huge effort of the will, then I ain't got much hope. But if the shining is down to God, then maybe it's different. And perhaps the shining isn't down to what we do, but what we are, intrinsically what God made us. Something about us that shines just because God wills it so. When I do baptism preparation visits with parents of new babies, there's a lot of shining around. Because the language of baptism is all about a love that shines in every parent's heart about this radiant little star of a life.

What does any parent want for their child? You want your child to know they're loved. Not because of anything they do, but just because they're there, because they exist. This is what reduces most parents to a state of complete goofiness as you stand at the foot of your little one's bed at night, and even if they've been a complete horror all day, your heart overflows. There's a radiance around you, around your child, and it is a full-blown, never-doubt-it-for-a-minute, miracle. This is a spark of the divine, light from the Holy Mountain brought right into your own home.

This is why our hearts are wrung when that miracle is soiled in any way.

Just this week I saw a little boy aged six in Idlib talking to camera, crying, just surrounded by rubble and devastation and death. And through his tears he said he wanted a gun to kill the people who've done this. What a terrible thing that anything should rob a child of the shining innocence and trust that should be every child's birthright.

The absence of that shine tells us that this need for love and light and radiance and warmth and joy, is something God has planted deep within us. This radiance isn't external, not achieved by a kind of moral scrubbing to make yourself fit for God or acceptable to the world. This is yours by right, by the divine plan. God says: You are my beloved... and those words reverberate way beyond the Holy Mountain to echo in our hearts for us. This is Peter's "lamp shining in a dark place." Light in our hearts, no matter what. This is not an external shine.

The American monk, Thomas Merton, an American monk, once caught a glimpse of this as, sitting on a bus, he watched people through the window and longed to share with them the glory he was seeing

"In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people. It is a glorious destiny to be a member of the human race, though it is a race dedicated to many absurdities and one which makes many terrible mistakes: yet, with all that, God Himself gloried in becoming a member of the human race. A member of the human race!

To think that such a commonplace realization should suddenly seem like news that one holds the winning ticket in a cosmic sweepstake. I have the immense joy of being human, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now that I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun".

It's a wonderful, famous passage, but suddenly I realise that after quoting it in many a sermon down the years I want to disagree with the last line. We can tell each other that we shine. We may not find that easy to hear or believe, but we need to go on saying it to each other again and again, for all those dark days when we need a lamp, a light and maybe it takes a friend to show it to us again. Tell someone today that they shine for you. Tell someone that they shed light for you. Tell someone they're radiant. Because the Father who calls us Beloved has lit a light in our hearts, and it never goes out. Amen.