

May I speak in the name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It's the last Sunday before Lent today, and as is customary, we hear today the gospel reading of the story of the transfiguration, which we've just heard. Every year, we have a different version, because the same story of Jesus' transfiguration on the mountaintop appears in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

It's something of a mysterious story. Jesus goes with Peter, James, and John and has this enigmatic transformation. As I say, it's common to all the gospels, well certainly Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but I want to focus on a detail that's only in Matthew's gospel. Actually all the gospel writers tell the story pretty similarly, but Matthew has a detail which the others don't include. It's always interesting when looking at the gospels to alight and pick and focus on what's unique in a gospel, because one would expect that to be a particularly revealing element if the gospel writer saw fit to include an element that's not in the other gospels. Only Matthew comments on the face of Jesus. Only Matthew says that Jesus' face was shining like the sun.

I want to offer a few reflections on the importance of a face in the Bible, because it isn't just Matthew who picks up this theme. Actually, he's picking up a theme that runs throughout the whole of scriptures, both the Old and the New Testaments, the importance of faces.

It's not just in the Bible that faces are important. It's possible that the first thing that any of us really see is a face, some parent looking closely at us soon after we're born. Babies get used to having adults get up close to them and look intently at their faces. We want to see what babies look like. You know how the conversation goes, "Oh, he's got his dad's nose, or Auntie Beryl's ears." We look closely at the details of babies' faces.

I remember holding my daughter Miriam soon after she was born and just looking intently into her face, whispering to her, "I'm your dad. You're mine, you're my little girl." I can remember how intent and intense those feelings were. I think that's probably the most intense face-to-face encounter I've ever had. Babies

have lots of close face-to-face encounters, which is no doubt why many of us grow up good at recognizing and reading faces.

I was in a museum a year or two ago, and there was a whole load of people drifting around. I saw someone that I hadn't seen since we were students together, since we were teenagers. We weren't particularly friendly, but I recognized him. Of course, he was now like me, a middle-aged man with the extra padding that comes with being middle aged. He was in many ways completely different to when I last saw him, but I knew straightaway who he was. I just recognized his face.

Faces are very individual. That's why they're so fascinating. There was a story I read about a man from Massachusetts, and he'd photographed his face. He'd photographed himself every day bar one. I don't know what he was doing on that one day, but every day bar one for 30 years and created this montage. It was interesting to see how he changed but yet remained the same. It was clearly the same face in all the images.

The Bible has lots to say about faces. In the Old Testament, we're told that Moses, just like the reading that we had just before where our reading began, that Moses would go up Mount Sinai to meet with God face to face. The hope held before us in scriptures is that one day we like Moses, we too will see God face to face. Jesus says that, "The angels in heaven continually see the face of my Father in heaven."

Then there's this amazing verse in 2 Corinthians, which is included in our communion prayer in the season of epiphany. We'll hear it today for the last time. But our prayer quotes a verse from 2 Corinthians. "For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." Saint Paul doesn't say the glory of God showing in the sunrise or any natural feature, as one might expect. But God's glory shining in the face of Jesus Christ. This is very particular, the knowledge of God, the glory of God, the majesty of God is fully revealed in this face, this particular face.

It's particular and it's personal. What could be more personal than a face?

I carry a picture of my lovely wife Laura in a wallet, and it's a picture of her face. She's got lovely knees, but it's not a picture of her knees. It's her face that calls her to mind, that makes her particular.

What this verse emphasizes is that when we think of God, which of course is an unimaginably large task to turn our minds to God, but when we do that, when we begin to think about God, the Bible invites us to think about this person, about Jesus Christ. Because it's in him, it's through this face, that God is supremely revealed, that God in his glory shines through this person uniquely in Jesus Christ. When God chose to make himself known to humankind, he revealed himself in the person of Jesus, this man with a face. He didn't send us a letter. He didn't send a messenger. He came himself in the person of Jesus Christ.

Jesus says in John's gospel, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father." That's an amazing thought. Christianity invites us to conceive of the ultimate in the form of a face.

I think that as we get older, we all tend to think of God in more and more abstract terms. We imagine God as some impersonal floating spirit. It's our children, the child in us perhaps, who dares to picture God with a face and speak of God like Moses did as a friend. Christianity is all about encountering God, meeting him, knowing him as a person.

Now, of course, the notion of the Trinity gives us a broader, richer, fuller understanding of God and speaks of the unknowability of God. But our understanding, our thinking, needs to begin and be rooted in the person of Jesus, and our understanding of God needs to broaden from that starting point.

I prefer to concentrate on what we do know, rather than speculate about what we don't know, to begin all thinking about God from the starting point of the person of Jesus. It is Jesus who shows us what God is like. In Jesus, we come face to face with God.

I once saw a very harrowing documentary about autism. You may know that autistic children find it difficult to communicate and build up sort of social skills and relationships. They live in their own world. They may be very gifted in some ways, such as music, but struggle to build relationships. In this program, they showed a new and somewhat controversial way of trying to help these autistic children. It was called the holding technique. It was harrowing to watch, because it involved the mothers of autistic children holding them very firmly in their arms and being encouraged to look at them, to look straight into the eyes and the face of their child. The child, of course, would not return their gaze. So whilst they were holding them firm in their arms, their head would be going from side to side doing anything to avoid returning the gaze of their mother. They didn't want to be held so firmly and so close, and the mothers were encouraged to hold them doing this, just looking, trying to engage them in a look for hours. We were showed these struggles with the children going from side to side. But occasionally, there'd be a breakthrough and a moment when the child stopped tossing from side to side and looked back at their mother, returns their gaze, looked into her face.

When that happened, when it did happen, there was a moment of peace as the struggling stopped and mother and child looked at each other face to face. And sometimes that was the beginning of a new relationship and stage in development.

As I watched this treatment, I was made to think that there's an image there of our relationship with God. We many of us just turn from side to side doing anything to avoid the gaze of God looking at us. We look for God in more and more fanciful ideas. But the Bible tells us that God is always there holding us, seeking to look into our eyes and establish that contact and build that relationship, to look at him in the face, to see him revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. Once we recognize the glory of God shining in the face of Jesus, then a relationship, a friendship can begin.

The goal of our life, where we're heading, is to see God face to face in glory. Saint Paul said in that famous chapter 1 Corinthians 13, which we so often hear at weddings, "Now we see but a poor reflection

as in a mirror. Then we shall see face to face." We can hope that our lives end as they begin. Just as our lives begin staring into the face of our parents, so we can hope to end looking into the face of God. We may hear those same words. "It's me. I'm your father. You are mine." Amen.