Matins Third Sunday before Lent Christ Church 2017

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Psalm 52, Jeremiah 30:1-3, 10-22, Acts 6

‘And all who sat in the council looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel’.

In nomine…

As a child, I took great delight in my mother’s tales of life in the school boarding house. A particular favourite was a ghost story she recalled being told after dark, whispered from bed to bed in the draughty dorms of St Helen’s, Abingdon. I don’t have my mother’s narrative skills, but the gist of it was this.

Late one autumn afternoon young couple were out for a drive on Salisbury Plane. Reaching the village of Winterbourne Stoke as dusk was beginning to fall, they just had time to visit Stone Henge. They parked their car on the verge – this, of course, was long before the days of visitor centres and new age cults, let alone cut and cover tunnels. In the dying light they slipped out to walk between the stones. They were alone – or so they thought until, underneath the farthermost stones, they thought they glimpsed a figure with his back to them. As they walked the ring of the henge they lost sight of him, until at the farthest point of the circle suddenly they found themselves almost bumping into him, huddled in a dark coat, scarf and cap. Taken aback, nonetheless they wished him ‘Good Evening’; he turned towards them and as he did so they saw that below the cap and above the scarf was nothing. The man had no face.

Panic-stricken, they stumbled back across the now pitch-black field to the safety of their car. Seeing the familiar shape of the car and the reassuring solidity of the tarmac road, they were heartened to see an RAC van parked near to theirs; in the cab the glow of the driver’s cigarette was visible through the dark night. Glad to find company, the couple went over to the van, knocked on the misted window and began pouring out what had just happened. Slowly the driver wound down the window and as he turned towards them to their horror the couple saw that the man had no face.

You can imagine the squeals of horror piercing the dormitory until matron arrived to restore order!

I tell that story as a counterpoint to the concluding verse of our second reading, which I took as my text: ‘And all who sat in the council looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel’. The human face is, perhaps, the greatest of the wonders of creation. Its variety and subtlety and expressiveness are so manifold that we might be tempted to us the adjective infinite – except of course that that would be wrong: the wonder of the human face lies precisely in its finitude – its proneness
to ageing, its vulnerability, its mortality. The faces of those we love do not retain for ever
the young child’s pristine skin or the vigorous glow of first adulthood, but we continue to
love them all the same. Sometimes the contrast between youthful beauty and the ravages
of age is stark – our own W.H. Auden comes to mind! – but in its own way the countenance
of the elderly Auden remains every bit as fascinating as that of the twenty year-old
Wunderkind.

The scriptures are full of references to the face. Sometimes, admittedly, the face is used as
a figure of speech: synecdoche, the part representing the whole. That’s most obviously true
in verses that talk of the face of God. In the Psalms, when God ‘hides his face’, he
withdraws his favour from his people. When worshippers are enjoined to ‘seek God’s face’,
the call is to worship and obedience: ‘This is the generation of them that seek him:
even of them that seek thy face, O [God of] Jacob’ (Psalm 24:6). Worship, very
often, is characterised through the image of the face. Think of Balaam and the ass. When
Balaam’s eyes are finally opened to the angel of the Lord whose presence has halted his
donkey, his reaction is described thus: ‘Then the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam,
and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road, with his drawn sword in
his hand; and Balaam bowed down, falling on his face’ (Numbers 22:31). And the
worship of heaven is described in similar terms in the Revelation to Saint John: ‘Then the
twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and
worshipped God…’ (11:16).

In the Church of England, worship doesn’t often take the form of falling on one’s face – not
literally anyway. But, English though I am, once a year, I do lay aside convention and take
this scriptural description of worship as more than a metaphor. On Maundy Thursday, after
the re-enactment of the Last Supper and Jesus washing his disciples’ feet, the blessed
sacrament is carried from the communion table to an altar of repose in a side chapel, where
it remains overnight. Those who wish may stay and watch before it, recalling our Lord’s
prayer and agony in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before he died. And, in a
throwback to the practices of the Catholic liturgy before the Second Vatican Council, I
make a double genuflection before the sacramental presence of Christ. To feel the cold
stone of the Lady Chapel on your cheeks, nose and forehead, even for a few moments, is
shocking and humbling and leaves one feeling both vulnerable and faintly ridiculous. But, as
with the annual footwashing and the weekly or daily eucharist, it enables one to begin to
share more fully in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share our humanity.
Falling on one’s face before the meekness and majesty of our Lord in his passion and death.

‘And all who sat in the council looked intently at him, and they saw that his face
was like the face of an angel’.

I’m not sure what the face of an angel looks like. I imagine that, rather like the face of God,
which, uniquely, Moses was privileged to look upon, to see the face of an angel is to become
angelic oneself, however momentarily. Exodus tells us that ‘the Lord used to speak to
Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend’ (33:11), but it also tells us that when he
had been speaking with the Lord, Moses’s face had to be veiled, so unearthly was its
appearance: ‘Moses did not know that his face shone because he had been talking with God…and Aaron and all the Israelites were afraid to come near him’ (34:29,30). Perhaps you have had the experience of seeing people leaving an act of worship and registering on their faces the afterglow of what they have just witnessed. Once, many years ago in Rome I was passing a church as mass ended and a wonderful array of members of different religious orders spilled out onto the street: brothers and sisters from the Dominicans, Benedictines, Salesians, Jesuits and many more orders well beyond my ken. I’ve no idea why they had bene worshipping together, but their faces registered the depth of what they had encountered together. The same is frequently true here. One of the privileges of serving in this cathedral is to stand at the west end at the close of worship and see those who leave: words often are not necessary, because the transfiguration can be seen on their faces.

My mother’s boarding school tale had all the characteristics of a classic ghost story. Familiar surroundings that suddenly turn fearful; flight to apparent safety; then the plunge into an even greater fear. This is the stuff of nightmares: a fellow human being with no face; worse still, a cheery, friendly RAC man with no face. In the seventeenth century, the French philosopher Blaise Pascal, articulated the terror he felt in the universe that the new science was revealing: ‘Le silence éternel de ces espaces infinis m’effraie’, ‘the eternal silence of these infinite spaces fills with terror’. He recalled Isaiah’s address to a hidden God – ‘vere tu es Deus absconditus’, ‘truly you are a God who hides himself’; a God whose face is hidden.

At times, all of us know that sense of terror in the face of an impassive universe, the fear of a God whose face is turned from us. But we also know something very different: the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ; and not just in the face of Jesus Christ, but in the faces of those who meet him in worship. Stephen’s face seemed to those who saw him ‘like the face of an angel’, and it did so because, as we heard earlier in the passage, ‘Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people’. ‘Full of grace and power’, ‘plenus gratia et fortitudine’, echoing Gabriel’s words to Mary, ‘Ave Maria, gratia plena’, ‘Hail, Mary, full of grace’.

When two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I among them, says Jesus. The grace and glory of God turned to us in the face of Jesus Christ, glimpsed shining in the faces of those with whom we worship.

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace. (Numbers 6:24-26)