

“Appearances”
Exodus 33:17-23; Luke 9:28-36
March 3, 2019

“Now THAT’S what I like to see!” Many people think these are words, ultimate words, of approval. If a family member has said it to you, you have satisfied those nearest to you, behaving in a manner that they expect of you. You are their beloved, in whom they are well pleased.

“Now THAT’S what I like to see!” If your boss or a client has said it at work, you know that you have successfully completed a job, a job well done. You have anticipated, and fulfilled, their expectations of you. Your time, your efforts, your skills have proven to be worthwhile, and thus the words “Well done, thou good and faithful laborer” ring in your ears.

“Now THAT’S what I like to see!” Maybe you have said these words to yourself, you have given your ego a pat on the back. You have lived up to your own wishes, you have excelled in something you consider to be of high importance. You have proven the naysayers wrong, you have demonstrated that commitment and perseverance have carried the day. And so you can tell yourself, “I am Somebody.”

But what your family would like to see, what your clients are pleased by seeing, and what you think, in your own eyes, is best ... is not always what you need to see. In fact, what people like to see may bear very little relation to ultimate realities of quality or goodness. And in this we may be deceiving ourselves, not really hitting the mark.

In our Old Testament Lesson this morning, Moses is busy talking with God up on the mountaintop. In the meanwhile, down in the valley the children of Israel have been left to their own devices. And so while Moses pleads with the Lord for the full glory of what is the most important thing in life itself, for a sight from which even the angels of heaven have to hide their eyes, the Israelites are asking themselves what THEY would like to see.

They, like Moses, would like to see something very precious, of great value. They, like Moses, are seeking after something in which they can place their ultimate trust. They, like Moses, wish to ever and always be present in the glory of the Ultimate. But Moses has gone to the mountaintop. He has scaled the heights. He is unafraid to go tracking into the unknown, to seek out what is great and good no matter what the risk, the danger, the consequences. The Israelites, however, have played it safe. They stay in familiar territory. They keep to the known highways and byways of their lives.

And so, while Moses beholds the glory of the Lord, the Israelites, even with the best of intentions, are worshipping a Golden Calf.

A calf of gold is precious. An idol is always there - in that you can trust. You can always be in its presence. After all these things did both Moses and the people seek. But it was Moses who found the true appearance of reality, while the people crafted for themselves a lie. A lie that had a comely appearance. And (sad to say), appearances, for the children of Israel, were of more importance than content. The outward facade was of more concern than the inward reality.

In our New Testament lesson this morning, Peter, John, and James, like Moses over a thousand years earlier, went to the mountaintop in order to see something that the rest of the world had no inkling of. They had left behind family, friends, and colleagues. They had given up their life's work. They surrendered, in their finer moments, any thought for self. For they had been shown something that only a few others saw in a carpenter from Galilee.

What did they see? Many people saw the power of healing for their diseases, but like the nine lepers, they did not even bother to give thanks. Some saw loaves and fishes multiplied, but did not seek to feed others with spiritual food, content to keep crumbs for themselves. Some saw a coming of great power, and like the Simon the Zealot who hated the Romans and their oppressive empire, they sought to use that power for their own selfish, personal ends.

But what did Peter, John, and James see? The glory of God come among humankind. They saw the reality that the Lord himself is with us, indeed. The outward appearance of their friend Jesus was not all there was to him. There was a lot more to him than just being a country preacher.

Today, just as in the time of Christ, there are any number of people who lack faith, who no longer have a vision, who are interested only in outside appearances. For some of them, the bottom line is the final entry on the accounting ledger. Much of the time, what that line actually represents is of little importance, unless, of course, it is written in red ink (!) But what IS the bottom line? What does wealth appear like? Is it in the glory of a Kingdom being prepared, or is it in a Golden Calf?

Others find their ultimate reality in power, in the control they can exercise over others. Money may mean little to them, except as a tool they can use in attaining their goal of lording it over others. But what IS power? What is strength? How do such realities appear to us? Is power the ability to do what you want to do despite the wishes of others? Or is power found in joining together with others to seek a common goal that is beyond personality, beyond party, beyond position, beyond this world itself? How does power appear for you? Is it found in love, or is coercion easier to exercise, and so seems too good to pass up? After all, don't the ends justify the means?

Still others find their ultimate reality to be nowhere but in themselves. Number One is the only one that counts. The rest of the world can starve, the rest of the world can live in terror ... the rest of humankind counts for nothing. But Number One doesn't care. Anything beyond Number One is of no concern. Number One has no social consciousness, no awareness of the needs of others, no feelings of sympathy or empathy.

But Someone has told us that in order to gain our soul, we should be prepared to lose our life. In order to be first, we must be last. In order to rule, we must serve. But who can see that? Who can understand that? Can Mr. Number One comprehend that in order to be first, he must be last?

It all depends on how we look at life, the universe, and everything. It all depends on what we see. Just because we have ears does not mean that we hear; just because we have eyes does not mean that we can see. Someone even now, from the table set before us, pleads for us, pleads TO us - to open our eyes and see not what we would like to see. Instead, Jesus wants us to see what he himself saw at this table, where a life poured out for many for their forgiveness is so real, that not even Death could end it.

Let us pray: