

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

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## Mine Eyes Have Seen

There are several places in the Old Testament which speak of the experience of "looking upon the face of God". Everywhere it is spoken of as a fearful or even deadly experience; and the theme of encounter with God is always accompanied by veils or curtains, clouds, and hiding-of-the-eyes. At the giving of the Law on Mt Sinai, the people are commanded to come no nearer than the foot of the mountain on pain of death: Moses hides in a cleft of the rock and looks on God *from behind* as he passes. When Moses has spoken with God he has to veil his own face before the Israelites, to protect them from the brilliance of his own transfigured countenance.

### I Cannot See the Face of God and Live

One feels that this sense of awe is somehow out of fashion today. We no longer allow ourselves to be silenced by anything. We are democrats, and we are all for equality and self-respect (I speak like an American). The poor old British Monarchy is doomed in this atmosphere, and we have to ask ourselves whether anything except perhaps the brute possession of power or wealth can any longer command that total respect which used to be called *the fear of the Lord*. The fact that we want the Lord to be (pardon me) *our mate* is writ large on much modern evangelism and church talk. I think this brings religion into disrepute, because I cannot see how that differs from worshipping ourselves. That's something I have only rarely felt like doing; and I've tried to resist the temptation, because it's against the first of the ten commandments.

### Transfiguration?

So what is the Transfiguration story about? The Gospel has reached a very sensitive point. Jesus has asked his disciples to say what they believe about him, and Peter has managed to make that profession of faith which Jesus acclaims as "inspired, not by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven": that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of the living God". Immediately Jesus begins to tell them about the Cross - the way he will live out this life of obedience and sonship. Peter is appalled. He calls on the

heavens to preserve Jesus and says: "This must not happen to you!" Jesus is suddenly cold and harsh to him. "Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle in my path! The way you think is not God's way, but man's." He insists that all who would be his followers must take up the Cross and go with him.

### Lord, to whom else could we go?

The Transfiguration is the Father's seal on that explanation, that call; and Moses and Elijah represent the Law and the Prophets, and assure us that this way of the Cross will fulfil the Old Testament. For Peter, the unwelcome news becomes inescapable; this man, for whom he has such a deep love, is going to his own death, and is now offering to take Peter with him too. The disciples are unsure and far from willing; but in Jesus *they have looked upon the face of God*; and for them the die is cast. To their love, that has brought them so far, is joined a new sense of awe; from now on, their following is not a mere matter of being attracted, but of obedience. Perhaps the brilliance of the vision makes them close their eyes. But it is a bright *cloud* that has dazzled them; and that speaks of a God who is shielding them from having to see face-to-face. Lent is a time to get used to the overwhelming Light of the World. To look on him *will* cost us our lives; for all who see him love him, and must follow him.

*Fr Philip*