

Have you ever felt close to God – but also maybe a little afraid? Today, on the feast of Pentecost, that might resonate a bit. Today we're invited to remember and to celebrate. To celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit, to celebrate how – as Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome – "God's love has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." [Romans 5.5] And this evening we get a couple of glimpses of what this might mean for us, for you and me. Which brings me to Moses, and to what happened to him, there in the tent of meeting outside the camp.

When we read this part of Exodus it pays to acknowledge the elephant in the room. This reading comes right after the story of the Golden Calf. The Hebrews are God's special people: God's rescued them from slavery in Egypt, given them the law, and is leading them through the wilderness to the Promised Land – only, the people have massively stuffed up by making a Golden Calf and worshipping that rather than the living God. God is angry and refuses to journey with them. And then we get an account of Moses' prayer habits, which heightens the tension and leaves us in suspense: what is going to happen to the people?

We learn some things about Moses' relationship with God. "The LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend." There's the face-to-face friendship, the talking together – and then there's something else. There's the glory. There's Moses' request to God: "show me your glory," to which God replies "you cannot see my face, for no-one shall see me and live." What's going on here – is there a contradiction? Actually, I don't think so.

It reminds me a bit of *The West Wing* – the TV series about a US President and those who work for him. There's President Bartlet, and there's his Chief of Staff, Leo McGarry. Bartlet and McGarry are close friends. They've known each other for years, they know each other's families, they laugh and joke, get annoyed and frustrated with each other. And yet – one of them is the President, and there's a line that McGarry knows should not be crossed. Maybe that's how it was between God and Moses. Friends – but. Maybe that's how it is between God and us. Friends – but. There is relationship and there is glory. We shouldn't ever forget the glory and the utter holiness of God.

But back to what I think of as the Golden Elephant. God's understandably angry with the people – but Moses pleads on their behalf. He reminds God that these are God's special people: God should go with them. He keeps pushing God, not letting up, until finally God concedes. "The LORD said to Moses, 'I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name.'" Moses wins the argument.

And that says something, doesn't it. Moses models prayer for us. This is the prayer of someone who's familiar enough with God, secure enough in a relationship with God, to push like this. Moses wasn't afraid to hold God to God's promises, his prayer dared to appeal to God's love for God's people, even in the light of God's holiness. Moses prays like this, and ends up getting God to promise to keep on journeying with the Hebrews as they continue through the wilderness. Are there people that we pray for like that?

And we hear about this today, on Pentecost, because the gift of the Holy Spirit assures us that this sort of relationship isn't just for major leaders like Moses, isn't just for the A-team. This sort of relationship, this meeting God face to face, this sort of confidence, is for us too. For ordinary people like you and me. We can pray like this. We can intercede for others like this: boldly, persistently, hopefully. We too can be "friends – but" with God – friends but never forgetting the glory and the utter holiness of God. Face-to-face – but never casual. Holy – but never distant.

Paul (good Jew that he is) doesn't forget God's glory. But he makes a surprising claim. He says that even the Corinthian church is being transformed to reflect God's glory. And here's another elephant we need to acknowledge – because anyone who knows anything about the church in Corinth knows how regularly they stuffed up. How much heartache they caused Paul. How much they hurt each other with their divisions, their spiritual snobbery, all the things they did wrong. Well, what I find comforting and depressing in about equal proportions is that the church at Corinth is actually like most congregations you or I have known. Some things, it seems, never change. But here is Paul claiming that the Corinthian church is being transformed by God's glory.

And yes, it's true – true for Corinth, true for our Cathedral parish. God's Spirit is at work transforming us all from one degree of glory to another. And Paul can say this to the Corinthians, and I can say this to us, because we can have faith, not in the church's abilities to change itself, but in the Spirit's work within it. That is the basis for the hope we share with Paul. That there are things God can do in us that we can't do on our own.

Paul reminds the Corinthian community about Moses. Moses talking with God until his face shone with God's glory, so he had to wear a veil. At first, this was so the Hebrews wouldn't be afraid to come near Moses, but later, says Paul, the veil was to disguise the fading splendour. Paul tells them – tells us – that if the written law could transform Moses's face for a just little while and then fade, then the Holy Spirit, the Spirit which brings life, will outdo that transformation. Bright as the old law was, it would look dull alongside the new shining brightness of the ministry of the Spirit, written not on stone tablets but on our hearts. We're invited into that deep friendship with God, even as we remember God's glory. And that invitation is for all of us, even if we're not sure where we stand with God today.

Today we remember and we celebrate. We remember the coming of the Holy Spirit and we celebrate the new covenant which brings life through that Spirit. We remember the example of Moses praying for his people, and we celebrate the fact that this sort of relationship is open to all of us. We can talk to God like that. We can pray for others like that. We remember the initial glory of the law on the tablets of stone and we celebrate the new covenant the Spirit writes on our hearts. And we celebrate the way we are being transformed to reflect God's glory. Eugene Petersen's paraphrase of Paul's words puts it like this: "Nothing between us and God, our faces shining with the brightness of his face. And so we are transfigured much like the Messiah, our lives gradually becoming brighter and more beautiful as God enters our lives and we become like him." That's quite an invitation, that Pentecost holds out to us, to keep moving further into that glory and that friendship. Thanks be to God.

Rev'd Dr Deborah Broome
Priest Associate