

*A Sermon given by the Revd Melanie Marshall, in Magdalen College Chapel, Oxford, on Sunday 7 February 2016.*

Let's begin with Exodus. Moses goes up Mount Sinai - a real place, you can still go there - and there he encounters God. And when Moses comes back down the mountain again, his face is shining. It is shining with the glory of the Lord. And everyone, all the Israelites, can see God's glory coming off him in waves, he's bathed in it. And everyone can see that, apart from him.

I have been watching an old television programme called My Mad Fat Diary. It's about a teenage girl in Lincolnshire, who hates herself. She thinks she is mad and fat, hence the name of the programme. Well, she is mad. When the programme opens she's being released from psychiatric hospital and into intensive therapy for self-harm and suicidal tendencies. And furthermore, she is fat. She weighs sixteen and a half stone, which is pretty fat by anyone's standards. So far so accurate. But then there's a third thing. She thinks that because she's mad (which she is), and because she's fat (which she is), she is also worthless. And nothing but a nuisance. Who spreads disaster wherever she goes.

And the whole point of this programme, all three series of it. The whole point is this. That all the other characters in the programme can see; and we the audience can also all see - which is that mad, fat Rachel, is wonderful. She is clever, and strong, and kind, and loyal, and honest, and funny, and pretty. And what we are watching for, what grips us through episode after episode is this question: we can all see that she is amazing, so when will she come to see that she's amazing? When will she catch on to the truth - that she is beautiful, inside and out. That she shines, with the glory of God. And everyone can see it, apart from her.

We have to begin, I think, with this acknowledgement. That truly, in the truest sense, we cannot see ourselves. We look at ourselves, and we see a bundle of characteristics - things to be ashamed of, or embarrassed about, or a little vain of perhaps, the weight gained, the bad skin, the good legs, the razorsharp wit. A big cluster of JUDGEMENTS. Sometimes positive judgements, but judgements all the same. When our friends, our loved ones, look at us, they just see us. Shining.

So then, they're fools, aren't they? They are fools. There is so much they don't know about us. So much that we conceal. Our friends, our families - they may look at us with eyes of love, but they don't know us properly. They don't know about the hateful thoughts we entertain. About the lurid sexual fantasies that take us to parts of ourselves we would rather not think about. They think they know us, but they don't. Because they only see the good stuff, that we let them see. And all the bad stuff, we conceal. We keep to ourselves. And that means that we are the only experts on ourselves.

So then it's a tussle. It's a competition for who knows you better. Who's got it right? You, or them?

People come to see you, if you're a priest, that's why I exist. And sometimes when people come to see me it's because really bad things have happened to them. I remember ages ago someone coming to talk to me and saying that the decades of abuse he'd suffered couldn't have been that bad because there had been let-ups. There had been Christmases and birthdays and holidays where it stopped for a while. His parents pointed this out. They wondered how he could be so ungrateful. So maybe he was just going mad. Maybe none of it had ever happened.

My friends, the world is not only made up of friends. There are people -and we will all meet them, at some point or another - people who are going to beam darkness into us. People who are full of damage and emptiness and so want to see damage and emptiness in us too, because if they can see it there, in your face, then it means it's not their own. It might be abusive parents. It might be a bullying boss. It might be a spurned lover who tells you everyone last one of your faults, every one, before walking out the door. And if we do not know that we are beautiful, and loveable. If we have never learned to see ourselves through the eyes of love. If we can't see that shine with God's glory, and we think instead that we can just indulge ourselves with endless self-loathing and self-deprecation. Then that is a very dangerous game to be playing, if we want to survive, in this world.

I have a beautiful friend - he is so beautiful, a big, manly, sexy, guy. And he cannot believe that he is attractive. Because the posters and magazines and movie-stars all say that his is the wrong look. Even though everyone who

knows him, knows he is a knock-out. We are always going to have two different stories coming at us. Forces telling us we are worthless. Forces telling us that we're beautiful.

Maybe you are all committed believers in God. And maybe you aren't. But I am going to say this in favour of God. That at very least, God tells us which way to jump. In the tussle, the tangle of perspectives - your perspective, the views of your friends, of your frenemies, of the dangerous bad people, the views peddled by people who have never met you and don't care about you at all - alongside all those perspectives, sits God. He's not part of that confusion. Because he knows. Unlike your friends, unlike you - he knows everything, and sees everything. Every detail of your soul. Not a thing hidden. So you can't say 'He doesn't know how bad I really am'. He knows exactly how bad you really are, even better than you do.

And God is on the side of the shiners. Even though he knows what a crummy person you are. And it's better than that. He's not just on the side of the shiners. He is the *fons et origo* of Team Shine. Because after all, he made you. He is the one who wanted you to exist at all. You bear his image. It's his glory that you shine with.

I am not going to tell you that coming to see yourself as the astonishing, beautiful, beloved child of God is a doddle. Oh yeah, I'll do right now. It's a life's work. There is so much ranged against us. We are so helpless to see our own shining faces. But I am going to tell you this. That if you accept the challenge you will never look back.

When Moses came down the mountain, Exodus tells us that the skin of his face shone, because? Because? Because he had been talking with God. Well, that's something we can do. Not directly, of course - but then not even Moses sees God directly (the bible tells us that no one can see God's face and live). But in scripture, and the sacraments. In silence, in prayer. In the friendship of other Christians. There we encounter God. Moses is a holy man. He knows, like we do, that he can never see God fully, in this life. But he accepts God's offer, all the same. He turns towards God, the God who made him, the God who loves him. He doesn't have to do anything. Simply by coming into the presence, just by being, willingly, in the presence of that God, he shines. Amen.

