

The Rev. Dr. Robert MacSwain
Thankful Memorial Episcopal Church
Chattanooga, TN / Diocese of East Tennessee
Fifth Sunday of Easter / 7 May 2023

Acts 7:55-60

Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16

1 Peter 2:2-10

John 14:1-14

At Sewanee, where I teach, the Spring semester ended on Friday. At least, it ended for my students, as I still have some grading to do. One of the classes that I taught had an unusual title—“*The Glass of Vision: Scripture, Metaphysics, and Poetry.*” It’s actually a two-part title: “*The Glass of Vision*” is a book that the English theologian Austin Farrer published way back in 1948, and “Scripture, metaphysics, and poetry” is what he says the book is about. So in the course, we read his book as well as various responses to it over the past 75 years, and along the way we wrestled with those three themes. So the course had Biblical, philosophical, and literary aspects, which made for some good discussions.

The title of Farrer’s book—*The Glass of Vision*—is intentionally ambiguous and evocative. It’s inspired by the King James Version translation of First Corinthians, Chapter 13, verse 12, where the Apostle Paul says, “Now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.” Those who are familiar with this language may naturally assume that Paul is describing our limited knowledge of God in this life by using the analogy of seeing something *through* translucent but cloudy glass that causes some obscurity and distortion in what is seen. But in Heaven, Paul is apparently saying, we will see God not through cloudy glass, but face to face. However, in the original Greek, Paul actually uses the word not for *glass* but for a *mirror*, and in the ancient world these were made of polished metal like silver and bronze. Most of these metal mirrors were not that great, however, and their reflections were only approximations of what you actually looked like. So instead of “Now we see through a glass darkly,” the New Revised Standard Version translates this verse as: “For now we see in a mirror, dimly.” In other words, the idea here is not about seeing something obscurely through glass, but seeing a shadowy and imperfect reflection.

As a classicist and biblical scholar, Farrer of course knew all this, but he clearly liked the anachronistic ambiguity of the King James Version more than the literal Greek translation. This was probably at least partly because in England modern glass

mirrors with a silver backing—that is, the kind of mirrors that we normally use today—used to be known as “looking glasses.” In Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass, and What Alice Found There* it is precisely through a mirror that Alice finds her way into a confusing alternate reality so very different from our own. Farrer seems to want to keep both of these ideas in play—“glass” as mirror in English usage, and yet also “glass” as a substance through which one indeed sees something, and perhaps sees it differently than normal. Not just a dark or dim or approximate vision, but a transformative one.

Now, I’m clearly taking my time to get there, but from what I said in the children’s sermon I hope you can see where I am heading with all of this. In our Gospel reading today from John, Chapter 14, Philip says:

“Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.”

Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?”

Here Jesus is saying that he is like a mirror that reflects the image of God, and so that if you look at Jesus you see God. And again, not a dark, dim, approximate, or shadowy reflection, but a perfect one. When we look at Jesus we don’t see God either through “a glass darkly” or “in a mirror dimly,” but *perfectly clearly*. This is indeed explicitly stated in the Letter to the Colossians, which says of Jesus: “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible...” That’s a truly astonishing claim, and one that I can’t explore further now, so let me conclude by some more reflections (sorry!) on this idea of Jesus as the perfect mirror of God. What are its implications?

We live in a world in which many people make many claims about what God is like and what God wants us to do. People often speak very confidentially about these matters, but I regret to say that sometimes it seems that their God looks more like them than like Jesus. According to the novelist and memoirist Anne Lamott: “You can safely assume you’ve created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.” So that’s the real question, isn’t it? Are we creating God in our own image, or are we letting God mold us into the *real* image of God, namely Jesus? Are we trying to remain safely in control in a world that makes sense to us, or are we willing to allow Jesus to take us through the looking glass into an inside-out and upside-down alternate reality in which the weak are strong and the last are first and the poor are blessed and the meek will inherit the earth?

But if Jesus is the perfect mirror of God, then how do we “look” at Jesus since he is no longer present as he was to Philip and the other disciples? Well, by reading the New Testament, especially the Gospels. By praying. By receiving Jesus in the sacrament. By doing the things that Jesus did and told us to do: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting those in prison, caring for the sick. But also by figuring out who among us looks most like Jesus in these ways and learning from them. As Paul says in Second Corinthians 3.18: “all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.” For if we look long enough into the mirror of the Lord, we will also eventually become like what we are looking at. And this is what we mean by salvation.