

**Sermon Preached
by Doug King
October 20, 2002
29th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Exodus 33:12-23, Matthew 22:15-22**

Phrenology, as most of you know, is a psychological theory based on the idea that mental faculties and character traits can be indicated by the shape of a person's face and skull. For instance a sloping forehead would connote a tendency toward criminal intent. Hmmm, let me see, well it does not appear that we have any purse snatchers or thieving CEO's with us this morning. Thankfully, the science of phrenology has been discredited over the years. But our fascination with faces has not waned. From botox parties, to rhinoplasty, to the latest products from Clinique, we are quite focused upon the appearance of our faces. And every popular magazine worth its salt has done a dozen different articles over the years about how to read people's facial expressions, pursed lips mean one thing, a furrowed brow another and heaven forbid you see a clenched jaw.

Our two biblical texts this morning both deal with the issue of someone's face. In our text from Exodus we heard an exchange between Moses and God which occurs shortly after the destruction of the golden calf which the people worshipped in Moses' absence. Moses boldly asks to know God's ways and to see God's glory. God generously promises to be present with the Israelites and even to pass by Moses revealing the divine glory, but only from behind. God's face will not be revealed to Moses.

In our lesson from Matthew this morning the Pharisees and the Herodians attempt to ensnare Jesus in the controversial debate over payment of tax to the Roman Empire. They are seeking to have him commit treason against the empire or blaspheme against God. Jesus takes the conversation to another level entirely noting the image on the coin used to pay the tax, a picture of the face of the emperor. He challenges them to render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's.

Our two stories provide us with an emperor whose face is plastered on every nickel in the realm, and a God whose face will not be seen even by the deeply faithful Moses. Frankly it puts us in a bit of a bind. We do love faces so. We seek to solve our disagreements and have our questions answered face to face. We believe we need to look someone in the eye to judge the truthfulness of what they say to us. So what do we make of this veiled divinity who will not attach a face to their promises?

I understand why those Israelites in the wilderness built themselves a golden calf with a bright shining face to worship. It is easier to size up a God that you can look in the eye. Bring us Caesar, a lot of folks thought that he was divine, and we can carry a picture of his face in our pocket next to our car keys. But this God of ours refuses to be gently placed into any pocket. This God of ours will not be looked in the eye and tamed in some fashion.

Our relationship with God is a singularly distinct endeavor that is not yet another of the type that we share with each other. Our God will not be analyzed and quantified by studying some semblance of facial features. We cannot stamp our image upon God to get a handle on with whom we are dealing. As sure as that coin in the hands of the Pharisees was stamped with an imprint of Caesar, it is we who have been stamped with the imprint of the divine. We are made in God's image. The closest we get to seeing God is seeing the handiwork of God's creation, which is perhaps never more startling than in the vast variety of human faces in our midst.

When Jesus tells his questioners to render to Caesar what is Caesar and to God what is God's, he is reminding them that everything and everyone belongs to God. It is one level of power to have your image imprinted upon some composite of metals. It is quite another degree of power to imprint your image upon the entire face of creation, upon every human face. All that we are is a gift fashioned for us by our divine creator.

We, like Moses, may wish to have God's plan laid out before us. We may wish to see God coming and look God in the eye as the divine approaches, but that does not appear to be a prerogative of the created toward the creator. We, like Moses are more likely to recognize God's glory after it has passed by us. We are more likely to see God's handiwork after it has been fashioned and God has moved on to the next glorious act. We are more likely to recognize God's glorious miraculous power in the wide eyes and tiny fluttering eyelashes of a young child; in the crooked smile of an old friend brought close once more; in the eyes of a comforting spouse; in the warmth of a grandfather's cheek against ours as we embrace.

As much as we long for a vision of God's big picture bringing us face to face with the pure glory of God it is not God who belongs to us. We belong to God, each and every one of us. In these days when we look in the faces of strangers, with our vision clouded by fear, looking for evidence that they may be a terrorist or sharp shooting murderer, let us remember who fashioned all faces. And perhaps the more we remember that we all belong totally to God, the more we will recognize reflections of the face of God in the faces of each other. In that recognition perhaps there is a world with a little less fear, a little more hope, and a few more clues to the presence of God in our midst. In that recognition perhaps there is more than enough glory for us to experience, to revel in, for an entire lifetime. Amen.