

The Transfiguration (Matt 17: 1-9)

The Transfiguration of Christ is the culminating point of his public life, just as his baptism is its starting point, and his ascension its end. Moreover, this glorious event has been related in detail by the writers all of the first three gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, while Peter and John, two of the privileged witnesses, make allusion to it.

The central point of the first three verses focuses on one word—and indeed, this word is the centre of the whole passage - “Transfigured.” The Greek term is well-known in English; *metemorphothe* (μετεμορφώθη) and from this we get our word “metamorphosis.” It is a complete change of form or appearance into a more beautiful or spiritual state; for example, we use it to describe the change from a caterpillar to a butterfly. Here then we have a complete change in the appearance, or form, of Jesus in the presence of the disciples. He then became brighter than the light, revealing his true glory to them.

These first three, or Synoptic, gospels explain the true meaning of the word transfiguration by adding “his face shone like the sun: and his clothes became dazzling white,” or “as white as light,” according to the Greek text, rather more significantly, perhaps.

In the transfiguration Moses, the lawgiver, and Elijah, the prophet, appear and talk with Jesus. The term ‘The Law and the Prophets’ is often referred to by Jesus as the most important aspects of the divine revelation in the Old Testament scriptures. Moses represents the Law; he went up Mount Sinai and, because he was with the Lord of Glory there, his face shone when he came back down. He wrote the Law which anticipated the sacrificial atonement of the Messiah, that the Messiah will bring the people back to God by his act of sacrifice and so he represents those who have died in the Lord.

Elijah did not die, but was taken up to glory in the whirlwind and the chariot of fire. Elijah represents those who have not yet died in the Lord. The ancient Israelites, the people of Judea at the turn of the era, and modern day Jews all in their turn await the moment when God sends “the prophet Elijah before the great and Terrible day of the Lord comes”, as foretold in the last two verses of the Old Testament, Malachi 4: 5 and 6. Thus Elijah was, and is, to come to prepare the hearts of the people for the coming of the Lord. By this narrative, the gospel writers mean to describe a vision of Jesus in heavenly glory as the Messiah. Elijah represents this messianic appearance.

We are told that the two of them, Moses and Elijah, speak to Christ, and Luke’s account tells us they spoke of Jesus’s “departure” (Greek ἔξοδον). They spoke of his coming death; but by the term the Bible uses we know they spoke of it as the fulfilment of the great deliverance in Egypt. Jesus’s death would be the exodus from the bondage of sin in the world.

The first three gospels are very similar in structure and content in as far as they relate the story of Jesus in very much the same way and are clearly interdependent. As such, they are known as the synoptic gospels. Mark’s gospel, often thought to be the first and more simplistic of them (wrongly, simplistic it is not), is comprehensively plundered by the authors of both Matthew’s and Luke’s gospels. In fact, there are only two passages not found elsewhere in the gospels. One is only two verses long and need not concern us here, but the other is sometimes known as ‘The Great Omission’. In Mark chapter 8, Jesus comes to Bethsaida and is brought a blind man to heal. He put his saliva (seen as a most powerful agent in the ancient world) on the man’s eyes and laid hands upon him, but the man was only partially healed – he saw people but they looked like trees walking – so Jesus had to have another go and this time the man’s sight was fully restored. I suppose that it is not too surprising that Matthew and Luke found this account showed Jesus to be lacking in his healing abilities and left it out. But they missed the point, since the next thing Mark relates is Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi when, in answer to his question to the disciples about who men, and themselves in particular, say that he, Jesus, is Peter replies “You are the Messiah”. This is followed by the transfiguration, a passage very nearly identical to the one from Matthew we have heard in our Gospel reading. Thus the theologian, Mark, leads us in a very short time on a symbolic journey from total blindness, through partial sight, then an acknowledgement about Jesus’s messianic status from his closest disciple and into an unmistakable vision of Jesus as a heavenly being to his disciples. From total darkness into blinding, heavenly light.

But will Peter, James and John listen to Jesus, as instructed by God's heavenly voice? Will they stand by Jesus as he goes to his Passion and death? We know the story. Peter denied Jesus in the courtyard of the high priest, and James, like the rest of the disciples, abandoned Jesus and fled. Perhaps only John listened to Jesus and was not scandalized by the passion and death of Jesus. In the fourth Gospel we read that John went right into the courtyard of the high priest while Jesus was being tried and went all the way to the cross of Jesus with the women. So, when the crunch came between his arrest and the first appearance of Jesus on Easter Sunday, Peter and James did not listen, they abandoned Jesus. Of course, their abandonment of Jesus was only temporary, whilst John remained faithful throughout Jesus's Passion. Later all three of them, Peter, James and John became great witnesses to Jesus. By tradition, Peter became the first Pope and bishop of Rome before dying for his faith and James was executed in Jerusalem by King Herod Agrippa 1 in his persecution of the new Christian following (Acts 12:2) and John was traditionally the author the Fourth Gospel, the Gospel of John, whether he in fact wrote it himself or it was the work of one of his close followers. So the three disciples did listen to Jesus although two of them were temporarily unfaithful during his arrest, trials and execution. Perhaps we are disappointed that Peter and James did not listen to Jesus; did not remain faithful to Jesus during the time he most needed them. They had seen Jesus transfigured, they heard the command of God to listen to Jesus, they had been with Jesus for other intimate moments like the raising of the girl to life again but they were scandalized by the Passion of Jesus.

But why should we be disappointed with them? We also have experienced and met Jesus in many ways and sometimes we too let him down. We meet Jesus in a most intimate way every time we receive him in the Eucharist. It is the time when we are closest to Jesus. We meet Jesus in the scriptures as they touch our hearts and Jesus speaks to us when we read them. The scriptures are not just about the life of Jesus; they also speak to us about our lives and in them we meet Jesus as he speaks to us about our lives. We have seen Jesus in the great people of history, Mother Teresa for example. But just as Peter and James needed to know that after Jesus's resurrection he did not hold their abandonment of him against them, we need to be reconciled to Jesus often because there are times when we do not listen to Jesus, times when we deny Jesus, not in the courtyard of the high priest in Jerusalem, but maybe sometimes in our everyday lives. Like Peter and James, we do not have to be conquered or governed by our weaknesses or sinfulness.

All three of the disciples present at the transfiguration have books named by or for them in the New Testament. The very short book of James does not mention it and John's gospel mentions it briefly in the famous prologue to his gospel, "The Word became flesh and lived among us. We have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth" (1:14). Among other things, John must have had this event in mind. Here the three disciples saw the glory of the Lord Jesus, so that they knew he was the divine Son who came into the world. They were still unclear about his death and resurrection, but afterwards they would understand more fully the reason for this revelation on the mountain. Matthew tells this event to make the identity of Jesus Christ perfectly clear, because the rest of the gospel will focus on rising opposition, suffering and death. But the transfiguration revealed that he is the Lord of Glory, that everything he did pleased the Father, and that he is the one to be obeyed. The glorious appearance and the voice from heaven left no doubt in the minds of the disciples.

And as we have seen in our epistle reading, Peter uses this experience as an exhortation to faith and belief – nothing cleverly devised, but solid genuine eyewitness of his majesty. Apostolic tradition is not a collection of myths, but is based upon the real experiences of those present. And then, Peter goes on to warn the complacent preacher amongst us "First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God." A timely and important warning indeed!