

## **Transfiguration of Our Lord – Cycle A**

### **August 6<sup>th</sup>**

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

### **Introduction**

According to explicit accounts in the first three gospels (Matthew 17:1-13; Mark 9:2-13; Luke 9:28-36), the Apostles Peter, James and John witnessed an unveiling of the divine glory of Christ, and the appearance with Him of Moses and Elijah. This event has come to be called the Transfiguration on the basis of the scriptural report, “He was transfigured before them”. According to tradition, the transfiguration occurred on Mount Tabor, but some believe it may have taken place on Mount Hermon or even on the Mount of Olives. There are no Old Testament parallels for this event, the closest being Moses’ face shining after he had visited with God on Mount Sinai (Exodus 34:29-35).

The feast of the Transfiguration became widespread in the West in the eleventh century and was introduced into the Roman calendar in 1457 to commemorate the victory over Islam in Belgrade. Before that, the Transfiguration of the Lord was celebrated in the Cyrian, Byzantine, and Coptic rites.

### **1<sup>st</sup> Reading -Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14**

As was said in the introduction to this feast day, there is no direct Old Testament parallel to the Transfiguration. Our Old Testament reading for today comes from the book of Daniel. We all remember Daniel from his encounter when he was thrown into the lions’ den but there is much more to the book than that. The aim of the book is to show that the God of Israel, the one true God, is greater than the pagan gods.

Everything we know about Daniel (the name means “God is my judge”) comes from this book. He belonged to the royal family of Zedekiah and was taken, by order of Nebuchadnezzar, in captivity along with other Jewish children, to Babylon in 605 B.C.. Like certain other young men he was later chosen by the king to be brought up and educated at court, where he was given the name Belteshazzar. God endowed him with special wisdom which soon led him to enjoy the king’s favor; he was so successful in interpreting the king’s dreams that he was appointed ruler of the province of Babylon. King Darvis wanted to make him prime minister, but the envy of his other ministers frustrated this plan; they plotted his death but God saved him in a miraculous way (the lions’ den episode).

There are two quite distinguishable parts in the book: in the first part (chapters 1 through 6) Daniel tells of his personal experiences at the royal court and ends with the experience in the lion’s den. The second part relates four prophetic apocalyptic visions

which Daniel received. It is from the first of these visions that our reading for today comes and it is a description of the celestial court.

**<sup>9</sup> As I watched, Thrones were set up and the Ancient One took his throne. His clothing was snow bright, and the hair on his head as white as wool; His throne was flames of fire, with wheels of burning fire. <sup>10</sup> A surging stream of fire flowed out from where he sat; Thousands upon thousands were ministering to him, and myriads upon myriads attended him. The court was convened, and the books were opened. <sup>13</sup> As the visions during the night continued, I saw One like a son of man coming, on the clouds of heaven;**

“Like a son of man” means in human form. The part of the vision not read today describes four beasts (four kingdoms) that had come from the great abyss below. The celestial court is sitting in judgment of the fourth beast. The human form is presented as a heavenly contrast to the beastly forms of evil. The beasts are figures of the pagan kingdoms, the one in human form symbolizes the holy ones of God most high. The concept of the “son of man” eventually shifted from a figure of speech for the theocratic kingdom into a term for the messianic king himself. This change appears in Enoch, written a century or two before the time of Christ.

**When he reached the Ancient One and was presented before him, <sup>14</sup> He received dominion, glory, and kingship; nations and peoples of every language serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not be taken away, his kingship shall not be destroyed.**

### **2<sup>nd</sup> Reading - 2 Peter 1:16-19**

At the time of the Protestant revolt (they didn't reform the church, the Council of Trent did after they left it) Martin Luther wanted to omit James, Jude, 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter, 2<sup>nd</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> John, Hebrews and Revelation from the canon of the New Testament.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> letter of Peter was written from Rome about a year before Peter's martyrdom (this would date the letter about A.D. 63). Various commentators place the date as late as A.D. 140 based on its discussions of Gnostic problems but these same discussions can (and do) address the heresies and errors of the Simonites and the Nicolaitans who were around in A.D. 63 and were forerunners of Gnosticism.

Around 1968 in German Lutheran circles the question of the place of 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter in the canon was reopened on the ground that the epistle shows objectionable signs of “early Catholicism”, that is, the idea of an authoritative interpretation of scripture.

**<sup>16</sup> We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ,**

The apostolic doctrine has nothing to do with the false teachings which he will address. The false teachers had labeled Jesus' future parousia a myth made up by human beings to control the lives of others.

**but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty.**

In response to this charge of myth Peter offers the best evidence, his own experience as an eyewitness that Jesus already possesses the essential qualities to be manifested at his coming: majesty, honor and glory from the Father, messianic and divine sonship.

**<sup>17</sup> For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that unique declaration came to him from the majestic glory, "This is my Son, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased." <sup>18</sup> We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven while we were with him on the holy mountain. <sup>19</sup> Moreover, we possess the prophetic message that is altogether reliable.**

The prophetic word, the Old Testament scriptures generally, also testify to the parousia.

**You will do well to be attentive to it, as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.**

The parousia. The transfiguration prophecy of the parousia can function as a light in darkness for those waiting for the final light, the "morning star" (see Revelation 2:28) to rise with Christ's parousia (1 Thessalonians 5:4).

The chapter then ends with these words: "*Know this first of all, that there is no prophecy of scripture that is a matter of personal interpretation, for no prophecy ever came through human will; but rather human beings moved by the holy Spirit spoke under the influence of God*" (2 Peter 1:20-21), which is the passage that bothers the German Lutherans because it points back to the Church, the eyewitness, as the only ones who have the authority to interpret scripture.

Again, later on in the closing of 2 Peter we read: "*And consider the patience of our Lord as salvation, as our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, also wrote to you, speaking of these things as he does in all his letters. In them there are some things hard to understand that the ignorant and unstable distort to their own destruction, just as they do the other scriptures. Therefore, beloved, since you are forewarned, be on your guard not to be led into the error of the unprincipled and to fall from your own stability. But grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory now and to the day of eternity. (Amen.)*" (2 Peter 3:15-18). Which again points out the necessity of looking to the Church to determine the proper interpretation of scripture.

## **Gospel – Matthew 17:1-9**

The transfiguration occurred shortly after the feeding of the five thousand and the four thousand. The account of the transfiguration confirms that Jesus is the Son of God and points to fulfillment of the prediction that He will come in His Father's glory at the end of the age (Matthew 16:27). This event marks the beginning of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem for His passion. If this reading sounds familiar, it is because we last heard it on the Second Sunday in Lent during this cycle.

**<sup>1</sup> After six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother,**

Peter, James and John are the inner circle of the apostles. They were also chosen to be separate from the rest of the twelve in the garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:37) and at the raising of Jarius' daughter (Mark 5:37).

**and led them up a high mountain by themselves.**

A mountain symbolic of revelation, a kind of Galilean Sinai; God spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai (Exodus 24:12-18) and Elijah at the same place (1 Kings 19:8-18). No localization is necessary although Carmel, Tabor, and Hermon have been suggested.

**<sup>2</sup> And he was transfigured before them; his face shone like the sun and his clothes became white as light.**

The brightness of the illumination recalls the brightness of the face of Moses after the Sinai revelation (Exodus 34:29-35), which made it necessary for Moses to veil his face.

**<sup>3</sup> And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, conversing with him.**

Moses and Elijah represent respectively the Law and the Prophets. The term "the Law and the Prophets" was used to designate the entire collection of Old Testament books, and thus the fullness of the revelation of God to Israel. Jesus joins the two as the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets (see [Matthew 5:17](#)). Elijah was assumed bodily into heaven (2 Kings 2:11) and Hebrew legend has it that Moses was also assumed. This may explain how both can appear here in bodily form. Neither Matthew nor Mark tell us what was discussed, but Luke 9:31 says "*They spoke about his departure (exodus), which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem.*"

**<sup>4</sup> Then Peter said to Jesus in reply, "Lord,**

Matthew uses the word "Lord", while Mark uses "rabbi" as the form of address. "Lord" literally means "my great one", an address of respect to God, angels, and earthly sovereigns.

**is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."**

Peter is a master of understatement. No doubt he is making a reference to the feast of tabernacles, one of three yearly feasts for which all males of Israel were required to travel to the Temple and lived in tents (or booths). The feast occurred in September-October and lasted for eight days. The three Apostles want to stick around for a while. The feast of tabernacles commemorated the sojourn of the Israelites on Mount Sinai while they received the revelation of the Law through Moses. This is not the revelation of another law, a greater reality is manifested here. Jesus fulfills the Law and the Prophets.

**it <sup>5</sup> While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud cast a shadow over them,**

This is the *shechinah* (glory cloud), the divine presence, the cloud that occupied the tabernacle in the time of Moses.

**then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.”**

These words are a revelation of the sonship of Jesus; Matthew repeats the words spoken at the baptism (Matthew 3:17) and adds “listen to him” (sort of like Mary’s “do whatever he tells you” (John 2:5). Jesus is the Son and the revealer. The Israelites are commanded to listen to a prophet like Moses whom God will raise up for them in Deuteronomy 18:15.

**<sup>6</sup> When the disciples heard this, they fell prostrate and were very much afraid.**

This is their reaction to the divine command (listen to him) rather than to the vision itself.

**<sup>7</sup> But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Rise, and do not be afraid.”**

Jesus’ touch overcomes their fear and perhaps consecrates them to further service. Luke’s account of the transfiguration suggests the disciples were asleep and this is a dream-vision.

**<sup>8</sup> And when the disciples raised their eyes, they saw no one else but Jesus alone.**

Moses and Elijah have withdrawn; diminished in significance before the fuller revelation in Jesus.

**<sup>9</sup> As they were coming down from the mountain, Jesus charged them, “Do not tell the vision to anyone until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”**