

Transfiguration of Our Lord – Cycle B

August 6th

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.

1st 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.

⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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. ¹³ 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) who 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, ¹⁴ 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.

2nd 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, 2nd Peter, 2nd & 3rd John, Hebrews and Revelation from the canon of the New Testament.

The 2nd 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 2nd 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.

¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ 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." ¹⁸ We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven while we were with him on the holy mountain. ¹⁹ Moreover, we possess the prophetic message that is altogether reliable.

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

"The constructions of the heretics are myths and human fantasies, which Paul wants us to avoid, he writes: 'Warn a heretic once or twice, and after that have nothing to do with him' (Titus 3:10). Peter here is already starting to do battle against the heretics. To the extent that they do not possess the truth, heretics are obliged to concoct a lie by using flowery words. But we are not like that, he says, because we saw the truth with our eyes when we were with Him on the mountain. Therefore we have the prophets who have proclaimed the same truth to us, and even better, as we came to behold ourselves, the Word came to us. What the prophets foretold, Christ fulfilled when He appeared. We were witnesses of this, and we heard the Father's testimony also." [Saint Cyril of Alexandria (died A.D. 444), *Catena*]

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).

"In the night of this world, so full of dark temptations, where there is hardly anyone who does not sin, what would become of us if we did not have the lamp of the prophetic word? Will this word always be necessary? No. It is only necessary until the daylight comes. Right now we have a night lamp because we are children of God., and in comparison with the ungodly, we are the very daylight itself. But if we compare what we are now with what we shall be in the future, then we are still in darkness and need this lamp." [Saint Bede the Venerable (died A.D. 735), *On 2 Peter*]

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 - Mark 9:2-10

The time is a little less than 1 year before Jesus' sacrifice on the altar of the cross. He has fed the 5,000 and the 4,000 and Peter has made what is called his "confession of faith" (erroneously, I believe, as faith is not involved – divine revelation is).

² After six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John

The inner circle of His apostles – only these three are close with Jesus here and at Gethsemane. Luke 9:28 says that Jesus went up the mountain to pray, Mark and Matthew don't tell us why He went.

and led them up a high mountain apart by themselves.

Mountains are the usual settings for supernatural revelations and theophanies. Traditional identifications of the mountain involved are Harmon and Tabor, but the actual site is unknown and unimportant.

And he was transfigured before them,

The Greek *metamorphothe* literally describes it. In Latin *trans* means radical change and *figura* means external appearance or body. The disciples are granted a glimpse of Him in His glorified state, which is to be His eternal state after His passion, death & resurrection.

³ and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no fuller on earth could bleach them.

Absolutely pure

"If anyone asks what the Lord's garments, which became white as snow, represent

typologically, we can properly understand them as pointing to the church of his saints [who] ... at the time of the resurrection will be purified from every blemish of iniquity and at the same time from the darkness of mortality (see 1 Corinthians 15:42-44). Concerning the Lord's garments the evangelist Mark remarks that 'they became dazzling white, such as no fuller on earth could bleach them.' 'In the night of this world, so full of dark temptations, where there is hardly anyone who does not sin, what would become of us if we did not have the lamp of the prophetic word? Will this word always be necessary? No. It is only necessary until the daylight comes. Right now we have a night lamp because we are children of God., and in comparison with the ungodly, we are the very daylight itself. But if we compare what we are now with what we shall be in the future, then we are still in darkness and need this lamp.' It is evident to everyone that there is no one who can live on earth without corruption and sorrow. So it is evident to all who are wise, although heretics deny it, that there is no one who can live on earth without being touched by some sin. But what a cleansing agent (that is, a teacher of souls or some extraordinary purifier of his body) cannot do on earth, that the Lord will do in heaven. He will purify the Church, which is His clothing, "from all defilement of flesh and spirit' (2 Corinthians 7:1), renewing [her] besides with eternal blessedness and light of flesh and spirit." [Saint Bede the Venerable (died A.D. 735), *Homilies on the Gospels* Homily 1,24]

⁴ Then Elijah appeared to them

The representative of the Prophets, assumed into heaven in 2 Kings 2:11.

along with Moses,

The representative of the Law. Hebrew legend has it that Moses was also assumed into heaven thus explaining his appearance here in a recognizable bodily form. The Hebrew scriptures, the Law and the Prophets, are fully represented. They witness the fulfillment of what they represent.

and they were conversing with Jesus. ⁵ Then Peter said to Jesus in reply, "Rabbi, it is good that we are here! Let us make three tents: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

Such as were used at the feast of tabernacles (booths). Peter may feel that the end times are here [Hosea 12:9b (12:10b in the New American Bible)] and wants to eternalize this experience.

"O Peter, even though you have ascended the mountain, even though you see Jesus transfigured, even though His garments are white; nevertheless, because Christ has not yet suffered for you, you are still unable to know the truth" [Saint Jerome (ca. A.D. 385), *Homily 80*].

⁶ He hardly knew what to say, they were so terrified.

Peter is at a loss for words, just like at Gethsemane.

7 Then a cloud came, casting a shadow over them;

Just like in the Old Testament theophanies (and also the annunciation) the cloud is a representation of God and the overshadowing denotes occupation or indwelling.

then from the cloud came a voice, "This is my beloved Son.

Just like at Jesus' baptism (Mark 1:11)

Listen to him."

Jesus is a prophet like Moses whose teaching must be heeded under penalty of extermination from God's people. Just like at the wedding feast of Cana, "do whatever He tells you".

"Moses was there, and Elijah. The voice did not say 'These are my beloved sons' for One only is the Son; others are adopted. It is He that is commended to them: He from whom the law and prophets derive their glory" [Saint Augustine (between A.D. 391-430), *Sermons on New Testament Lessons*].

8 Suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone but Jesus alone with them. 9 As they were coming down from the mountain, he charged them not to relate what they had seen to anyone,

The descent from the mountain and the command to secrecy are elements of Old Testament theophany patterns (Exodus 32:15 = coming down; Daniel 12:4, 9 = silence).

except when the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

Unlike other commands to silence in Mark, this one has a special time limit – Christ's resurrection.

10 So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what rising from the dead meant.

The disciples' problem was how Jesus could be raised from the dead before and apart from the general resurrection which was to occur at the coming of God's kingdom.