

Transfiguration of Our Lord – Cycle C

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 11th 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 the books of James, Jude, 2nd Peter, 2nd and 3rd John, Hebrews and Revelation from the canon of the New Testament.

The second 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 - Luke 9:28b-36

The story we hear today sounds familiar, we last heard it on the 2nd Sunday of Lent (Cycle C). The time is about one year prior to Jesus’ death and resurrection. He has fed the five thousand, fed the four thousand, walked on water, delivered His bread of life discourse, and Peter has made his revelation at Caesarea Philippi “You are the Christ.” Jesus has just bestowed upon Peter the name of Rock (*kepha*), promised to build His church upon this rock, and given Peter the ability to bind and loose. About eight days after this, today’s reading occurs.

28b [Jesus] took Peter, John, and James

The inner circle of disciples. Peter is always listed first, showing primacy.

and went up the mountain to pray.

This account is structured to show a parallel with Moses who went up Mount Sinai to talk with God (burning bush) and to receive the ten commandments. Why did He take the three disciples with Him? A life and death moment requires two or three witnesses (Deuteronomy 17:6).

29 While he was praying

Often in Luke Jesus is portrayed at prayer before an important decision: election of the twelve (6:12); Peter’s revelation (9:18); instruction on prayer (11:1), the agony in the garden (22:41); and on the cross (23:46).

his face changed in appearance and his clothing became dazzling white.

The various translations of the Bible give an interesting description: “white and glistening” (King James Version); “bright as a flash of lightening” (New International Version); “sparkling white” (New Jerusalem Bible). See also Mark 9:3.

³⁰ And behold, two men were conversing with him, Moses and Elijah,

Two witnesses from the old covenant: Moses represents the Law and Elijah represents the prophets. The Old Testament scriptures are fully represented. Elijah is to herald the coming of the Messiah [Malachi 4:5 (3:23 in The New American Bible and New Jerusalem Bible)].

³¹ who appeared in glory and spoke of his exodus that he was going to accomplish in Jerusalem.

Saint Luke is the only one of the Gospel writers to tell us what Jesus, Moses and Elijah were discussing – Jesus’ mission to go to Jerusalem and be crucified, then spend 40 days on earth before ascending.

³² Peter and his companions had been overcome by sleep,

Moses and Elijah had come to speak to Jesus only.

but becoming fully awake, they saw his glory and the two men standing with him. ³³ As they were about to part from him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good that we are here; let us make three tents, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

Peter is not anxious for this to end. A reference to the feast of tabernacles (see Zechariah 14:16).

But he did not know what he was saying. ³⁴ While he was still speaking, a cloud came and cast a shadow over them, and they became frightened when they entered the cloud.

The cloud is a symbol of God’s presence.

³⁵ Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my chosen Son; listen to him.”

This is the central point of this reading. Moses and Elijah (representatives of the old covenant) have left and Jesus remains to institute the new covenant. Just like Mary said at the wedding feast at Cana, “Do whatever He tells you.” See also Hebrews 1:1-2.

³⁶ After the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. They fell silent and did not at that time tell anyone what they had seen.