

Today is the Feast of the Transfiguration, the event which we read about in the Gospel according to St. Luke. This event is also recorded for us in the other two synoptic gospels, Matthew and Mark. In the Transfiguration, the appearance of Jesus was altered, transformed, transfigured, so that He shone out with a heavenly brilliance as three disciples gazed on. The records we have indicate that this feast was first celebrated in Jerusalem in the 7th century, and by the 9th century more widely throughout the entire Byzantine Empire. The date of August 6 was established for the celebration by Pope Callixtus III in 1457 as a thanksgiving to God for the defeat of the Ottoman Turks at the battle of Belgrade on that date the previous year. August 6 is still the official day of this celebration, but due to our modern busy-ness, this feast day, like most of these days, is often overlooked. But also with the introduction of the Revised Common Lectionary in the 1970s, the Transfiguration became the subject of the reading on the last Sunday prior to Lent. Although we here at Christ the King use the older lectionary, and therefore retain the pre-lenten season, the “-gesima” Sundays, it is also thematically appropriate to discuss the Transfiguration during the Epiphany season, for it is indeed truly a revelation of fullness of Christ to the world.

So how should we understand this event? First let’s review the actual description from today’s gospel reading, and then dig into some of the implications. Jesus took Peter, John, and James up to the top of a mountain to pray. Though the mountain is not specified in the text, Origen in the 3rd century states that this is Mount Tabor, about 15 miles off of the south west corner of the Sea of Galilee, and this mountain has remained associated with the Transfiguration since that time. Well, it seems that Christ intended His three companions to pray with Him on the mountain, but the three disciples were evidently more interested in sleeping than in prayer. After all, it had been a strenuous hike! However, during his nap, Peter evidently rolled over and, briefly opening his eyes, caught a glimpse of something quite amazing. As Christ prayed, His eternal glory came upon Him, changing His very appearance. For a time, Christ’s body composed by the material of this world was overlaid and subsumed with the material of eternity. Jesus became radiant, “white and glistening,” as the text says. This radical transformation caught Peter’s attention, and he instantly became wide awake, and also stirred up the other two disciples so that they could behold the glory of Christ.

Additionally, Christ was not alone in His radiance: Moses and Elijah had been sent from the place of the godly departed to minister to Him and to discuss the path that He was about to take. The scripture said that these two Old Testament persons “Spake of His decease [in other words, His death] which He should accomplish at Jerusalem.” Why Moses and Elijah? These were the two prototypical figures of the Old Covenant. To Moses was given the law upon Mount Sinai, and therefore he represented the Law. Elijah was considered the greatest of the prophets, and so he represented the fullness of the prophetic ministry. The point here is that the Old Covenant bears witness to Christ and foretells of the sufferings of

Christ, even though it is doubtful that during their earthly ministries either Moses or Elijah fully understood the details of the messianic event and ministry. Surely they had not comprehended the redemption that Christ would bring about for creation, but in that moment, the plan was laid bare before them.

The wording of this discussion in the gospel account is also worthy of note. Moses and Elijah spoke to Jesus of the death *that He was to accomplish*. It does not say the death that would happen to Him, or that He could not stop, or could not avoid. Jesus is not a passive object in this account. He is the acting subject in the journey to the cross. He is in control. He is acting with intention, and He would accomplish this redemption on our behalf because of His love for us through the suffering and death of the cross. Jesus, eternal God as Man, pre-existent before the world, is the pivot upon which the cosmos rotates. He acts and the world responds.

And of course, the disciples who are allowed to witness the Transfiguration are certainly awestruck. James and John, having a bit more sense than Peter, remain quiet witnesses. Peter, always impetuous, not thinking, but just acting, “not knowing what he said,” as the account reads, thinks he should say something, especially as he sees Moses and Elijah departing. “Master, it is good for us to be here: and let us make three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias.” A tabernacle is a temporary shelter that can be a tent as the Old Testament tabernacle was, or it can be a lean-to made from any material at hand such as the Israelites made during the feast of booths. Why did Peter make this suggestion exactly? We cannot definitively know what was in his mind at that moment, but it is evident that Peter was not ready to let this visitation end. He wanted Moses and Elijah to remain with the transfigured Christ, and so perhaps thought that if there was shelter from the sun, that they would stay longer.

But as Peter spake these words, a cloud appeared and engulfed them, and they understandably became afraid. This cloud represented the shekinah glory of God the Father. It represented His traveling judgment seat, His throne room; it is often described as being accompanied by thunder and lightening. The account in our reading today is no different for the Voice of God issues forth seemingly as thunder. “This is my beloved Son. Hear Him!” I bet Peter, John, and James were very glad to have that voice pass, even though Moses and Elijah were no longer there and even though Jesus' appearance had returned as it had been previously. I do not think being upbraided by God (even as I'm sure that this was a very mild upbraiding) would be an enjoyable experience.

Now this event made a lasting impression on the disciples who were there. How do we know this? Because they say so—well, at least Peter explicitly references the Transfiguration in the reading from his epistle this morning. Though John's writings are not as explicit about this event, the glory and illuminating light of Christ sets the context within which he writes. It was this blazing glory that was revealed to him in the Transfiguration.

Let us now turn our attention to today's Epistle lesson. To set the context of the passage a bit, at the beginning of this first chapter Peter is encouraging the Christians in Asia Minor to diligent obedience to Christ for the sake of their spiritual growth in the love and fellowship of God. There is an urgency in his admonitions, both because of the importance of this mission in the life of the Christian, and because Peter knows that he does not have very much time to live. He wants to exhort these believers to the fullest obedience while he has the opportunity.

He concludes this appeal with the last verse of our reading which states, "(We) were eyewitnesses of his (Christ's) majesty. For he received from God the Father honor and glory, when there came such a voice to him from the excellent glory, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. And this voice which came from heaven we heard, when we were with him in the holy mount." Peter is urging we Christians to faith and obedience based upon the glory and honor to which he, John, and James were eyewitnesses. This is no deception or trickery on his part, for what he saw with his eyes and heard with his ears, and felt as the Voice of God boomed like thunder, was the most real thing in his life. Isn't it interesting that St. Peter does not appeal to the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus here, but instead is more dramatically motivated by his experience of the transfigured Christ?

Also, here in his letter, Peter finds himself much in the same situation as Christ was when they were on the Mount of Transfiguration. Christ was then steadfastly moving toward his crucifixion in Jerusalem. Peter, in this test, is moving steadfastly toward his crucifixion as well, and we know that Peter would be crucified upside-down, for he refused to be killed in the exact same manner of Jesus. Additionally, we should note that Peter uses the word "tabernacle" when referring to his own body and the approaching death. "I think it is meet, as long as I am in this tabernacle, to stir you up by putting you in remembrance; knowing that shortly I must put off this my tabernacle, even as Christ hath shewed me." This was the same word that he used when he so awkwardly and inappropriately spoke during the Transfiguration event. This is not by accident.

Let us take a quick detour to Hebrews chapter 8 to understand this better. Reading a few lines from the beginning of the chapter:

Now of the things which we have spoken this is the sum: We have such a high priest, who is set on the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens; A minister of the sanctuary, and of the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, and not man.

... seeing that there are priests that offer gifts according to the law: Who serve unto the example and shadow of heavenly things, as Moses was admonished of God when he was about to make the tabernacle: for, See, saith he, that thou make all things

according to the pattern shewed to thee in the mount.

Now this verse is not referring to the mount of Transfiguration, but rather to Mt. Sinai, when Moses went up to meet with God and received the Law, which included the instructions for the temporary house of God, the Tabernacle. This special tent represented God's presence with His people. During the wilderness wanderings, the glory of God illuminated Moses' face so that He had to be veiled in the presence of other people. That tabernacle was a pattern of the heavenly one as the Hebrews passage states, "seeing that there are priests ... who serve unto the example and shadow of heavenly things. See ... that thou make all things according to the pattern shewed to thee in the mount." The Mosaic tabernacle was a man-made pattern of the True Heavenly Tabernacle that was divine from God alone.

Hebrews reveals Christ as our great high priest, but the Mount of Transfiguration reveals Christ as the True Tabernacle. He is the archetype for the tabernacle on earth which God indwelt with His glory, as evidenced by the cloud and fire. In Christ the fullness of God perfectly exists, and this perfection of deity in humanity and humanity taken into deity bursts forth from Him in glory and light as revealed in the Transfiguration. In Christ, God and man are truly united. And this imagery gives insight into just what was so unseemly about Peter's suggestion at that time. Christ the True Tabernacle was not to be housed within a lean-to cobbled together by some sleepy disciples. The images and signs of the heavenly pattern are done away with when the heavenly reality comes. The divine light of Christ is not to be hidden under a bushel.

St. Peter's use of the word "tabernacle" in the epistle also highlights for us the temporary nature of our natural bodies. Peter is considering his upcoming death, and is therefore keenly aware that his physical existence, the tent in which he has dwelt his whole life long, will soon be put off. Yet we are reminded through Christ's glorious revelation that as He is, so shall we be. We too will be transfigured with the glory of God in the life of the new earth, when we are resurrected, as St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, with our new spiritual bodies. Christ's transfiguration reveals to us our transfiguration – not that our glory will match that of the eternal second person of the Trinity, but that we will in that existence be able to image God as He intended us to do. Yes, the image of God still resides with us now, but it is muted and tainted by the sin in us and in the world. In the resurrection we will be free from the sinful and grasping nature which we now have, and our bodies will be free to shine with the glory of God.

But before we do so, we must heed the exhortation of St. Peter. It is not yet our day to shine with the unencumbered glory of God; but still, by God's grace, let us shine forth as best we can with the encumbered glory of God! Christ is the True Tabernacle, but each of us are the earthly patterns of Him. God resides in us, and therefore we are, and must continually be, transfigured by His presence in our lives. As we prayed in our collect, " Mercifully grant that

we, being delivered from the disquietude of this world, may be permitted to behold the King in His beauty.” The Beauty of the King revealed in the Transfiguration filled the imaginations of Peter, John, and James, and motivated them in their lives, their ministries, and their deaths. May we also behold the beauty of the Transfigured Christ. May the glory of Christ shine into us and through us and make us fit for service in this world, and for eternal glory in the next.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. AMEN.