

Transfiguration

I take as my text today from St. Luke's Gospel:

This is my beloved Son: hear him

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable unto thee, O Lord, my Strength and my redeemer.

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Transfiguration, an event in our Lord's life witnessed by Peter, James, and John who were perhaps his closest disciples. It is recorded in all three of the Synoptic Gospels — in Matthew 17: 1-13, in Mark 9: 2-13, and in Luke 9: 28-36. It was Luke's account that we heard for our Gospel today.

The Feast of the Transfiguration had its origins in the Eastern Church where it began as an unofficial, local feast; however, by the year 1000 it had become widely adopted in the Eastern Church but it was not introduced into the Western Church until much later.

Actually, it was on August 6th, 1457 that the observance of the Feast of the Transfiguration became official in the west. That was when Callixtus the III ordered its universal observance in commemoration of the victory over the Turks at Belgrade on August 6th the year before, 1456, or some 560 years ago.

The setting for the Transfiguration was Mt. Hermon, near Caesarea Philippi, described as an "exceeding high mountain," roughly 9000 feet. Some had supposed the site to be Mt. Tabor, but Mt. Tabor, just about 2000 feet high, was much farther away in the opposite direction, and was topped by a fortress — not a place of solitude.

Jesus, a week earlier, had announced to the disciples that He was going to Jerusalem to die, an announcement not well received and much misunderstood. As was customary for our Lord, He sought a place of solitude to pray and took Peter, James, and John with Him.

As we heard in our Gospel passage, Jesus was transfigured in the presence of the three. Mark, in his account, says the garments of Jesus became radiant, using a word that would indicate the glistening of the golden glare of sunlight. It was not as if the light were shining on Him; truly, the light was emanating from within Him

There appeared with Jesus, Moses and Elijah — Moses the "supreme law-giver" of Israel and Elijah the "first and greatest of the prophets" — they were walking and talking together. They were discussing the ordeal that was to come and the death of our Lord. It was as if they were assenting to and acknowledging God's approval to the course Jesus had chosen, reassuring our Lord that the Cross was what all of history had been leading up to, that is, the inevitability and the righteousness of the Cross.

At the same time, the three Apostles were reassured. Their hearts had been shattered when Jesus told them his purpose for going to Jerusalem. Now, they were reassured by the voice of God acknowledging Jesus as his Son in the presence of Moses and Elijah.

Then, it was over and Jesus told them to tell no one of the event they had witnessed. It would be premature for others to know; but their witness would be essential later.

Though the event had a certain mystery about it, we have the witness of the three Apostles. The three, who had demonstrated the greater faith in who Jesus was, were rewarded by seeing first hand the glory of Christ.

To them was revealed Christ in His divine glory that they might be sustained by that vision during the trials that were to come.

To them was revealed the unity of the Old and New Testaments through the appearance of Moses and Elijah with our Lord.

Moses the great intercessor; Elijah the great reformer; Jesus the Reconciler, as St. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:19, *“That God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself.”*

At the same time they saw revealed the subordination of the Old to the New in Jesus Christ as Moses and Elijah disappeared and Jesus remained.

Then those powerful words heard by Peter, James, and John — “This is my beloved Son: hear him” — confirming again the glory of Christ and the subordination of the Old to the New. “Hear, not Moses and Elijah, but my beloved Son.”

Peter wrote about this in his Second Epistle, chapter one, verses 16 through 18:

“For we have not followed cunningly devised fables, when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of his majesty.

For he received from God the Father honour 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.”

John put it in these words in the first chapter of his Gospel:

“And we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the father, full of grace and truth.”

Not to be lost in this wonderfully vivid witness of the glory of our Lord is what led up to that moment.

Jesus had gone up the mountain to pray taking the three disciples with Him. Our Lord did nothing without His father's approval and here He was embarking on the final journey that would lead to His Crucifixion. It was during the humble act of prayer that Christ was exalted and transfigured.

Our Lord not only provided us with the perfect example of prayer-life but also provided us with the perfect prayer.

Following his great example, we, too, should approach each day, each circumstance in our lives in prayer, seeking God's blessing, his guidance and direction, in all that we do.

For us as Christians, as disciples of Christ, prayer is a duty; a transforming duty; a transfiguring duty.

If we take the meaning of the word "transfigure"— that is, to change the appearance or form — to denote that that which is changed takes on a new aspect, we, too, can be transfigured, transformed through prayer.

For Jesus Christ, prayer was an intimate communication between him and the Father. It can be for us, too.

On Mt Hermon, at that moment in time, something extraordinary happened, beyond our comprehension as human beings. The three Apostles themselves, Peter, James, and John, were at a lost for words.

What they witnessed, we, today, must take to heart on faith. That, in itself, is both a mystery and a beauty of Christianity.

It is not the empirical but faith that defines the depth of our relationship with God, even as over the centuries, faith has defined each individual's relationship with God and Jesus Christ.

At the heart of that faith is love: God's love of all his creation and the returning of that love from each creature to his creator.

Now, as we reflect upon the Transfiguration, another most wonderful aspect is the revelation of the intimacy that God holds dear in his relationship, not only with his only-begotten Son, but also with each of us.

As witnesses on Mt. Hermon, Peter, James, and John were witnesses to the intimate relationship that God has with his Son, extended to us through the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, extended to us through divine love.

We begin to experience a transformation of ourselves, our lives, when we fully engage our hearts and finally begin to transfer what we believe on an intellectual level to our heart and soul and incorporate it into our very being.

Then, we begin to take on a glow from the wisdom, grace, love, and joy we receive through that intimate communication with God that comes through prayer; that transforming communication that enables us in our relationships in this world yet keeps us centered in the world to come.