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A Biblical
Meditation

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The Transfiguration, which is among the most prominent feasts of the Orthodox calendar, has been somewhat neglected in Western Christianity.¹ Most of the faithful only encounter this feast every seven years or so, when the appointed day, the 6th of August, falls on a Sunday. The feast has been raised in public consciousness by its inclusion among the Luminous Mysteries, which Pope John Paul II instituted in his apostolic letter *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*.² The survival of the feast in the West is largely due to its promotion by the Cluniac Benedictine Congregation and especially by one of its leading Abbots, Peter the Venerable (1092-1156). Peter wrote a series of prayers for this feast and an accompanying homily. The feast of the Transfiguration has been a great source of spiritual nourishment through the ages and it can be so today when praying the Luminous mysteries.

The account of the Transfiguration occurs in the three synoptic Gospels, (Matt 17:1-9; Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36) and in an abbreviated form in the second letter of Peter (2 Peter 1:16-18). There are *two* broad strands in the history of interpretation of the Gospel accounts, one viewing the Transfiguration as an anticipation of his Passion and the other as a manifestation of Christ's glory. These two strands are reflected in the Gospel accounts' appearances in the lectionary, namely, on the second Sunday of Lent and at the feast of the Transfiguration on the 6th of August. The Transfiguration Gospel is heard in a Lenten key each year and so the emphasis can fall more on the passion rather than the glory. The Luminous Mysteries balance this tendency by providing a wider context to explore the Gospel passage and by maintaining *both* aspects in tension.

1 This talk was delivered at a study day on the Transfiguration, entitled "Opening to the Divine Light," held at Glenstal Abbey on 11th February 2023.

2 The text of the Apostolic letter is available at: https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/2002/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_20021016_rosarium-virginis-mariae.html

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THE TRANSFIGURATION – A BIBLICAL MEDITATION

There is much similarity between the three synoptic Gospel accounts of the transfiguration but also important differences. The lectionary takes each evangelist's account in turn, so that the distinctive voice of each is heard. However memory and imagination tend to collapse the three accounts into one. This year, the first year of the three year cycle of readings for Sundays and feasts, namely year A, is the year in which the Gospel account comes from Matthew. The following meditation will come from a close reading of Matthew's text (17:1-9).³

OVERVIEW

The Transfiguration account begins with a change of time, place, and persons, and it ends with a return from that special time, place, and cast of characters. At this secret time and place, Jesus selects those that come with him. The three disciples go along with Jesus, and afterwards they will find themselves alone with him. Something special happens and yet all seems to return to normal at the end. This seeming normality covering the extraordinary happenings is unmasked by the command of Jesus to the disciples that they tell no one about the vision until the Son of Man should rise from the dead (17:9). This command incites readers, who have been external observers to the events on the mountain, to look back to what they have witnessed along with the three disciples through the Gospel account.

AFTER SIX DAYS

Matthew begins the account in a surprising manner "after six days" (17:1). When one hears this one might ask what happened six days ago that time is referenced from this event. The preceding chapter recounts Peter's confession of Jesus' identity as the Christ at Caesarea Philippi (16:13-19) but also his failure to understand the associated suffering (16:21-23), whereupon Jesus gives further teaching on the demands of discipleship (16:24-26) and the imminent coming of the Son of Man in glory (16:27-28). Indeed, some present will see the Son of Man coming. The specifying of the time links Jesus' teaching at Caesarea Philippi to the upcoming events. Therefore, there is a strong expectation of an imminent glorious manifestation of the Son of Man but one that also encompasses suffering both for the Son of Man and for his disciples.

3 Since there will be many references to Matthew's Gospel only chapter and verse number will be indicated.

THE FURROW

In the bible notices of time often point to the present or future, as much as backwards. The day following six days is the seventh day, a day of momentous events in the Bible and one that is commemorated as the Sabbath. The Sabbath commandment, that all should rest on this day, is well known. It is perhaps less well known that there are two different reasons specified for the keeping of the Sabbath in the two versions of the Ten Commandments. In the book of Exodus the people are urged to keep the Sabbath because on the seventh day the Lord God rested after the work of creation (Exod 20:8-11), while in Deuteronomy the Sabbath rest is to commemorate the Lord God's deliverance of the people from slavery in Egypt (Deut 5:12-15). The seventh day timing of whatever is to happen has undertones of both creation and redemption.

THREE DISCIPLES

Peter, and James and John (otherwise known as the sons of Zebedee), are among the first of Jesus' disciples (4:18-22) and appear as such in the list of the twelve (10:2). Close family members are also associated with Jesus: Peter's mother in law was healed by Jesus and served him (8:14-15) while the sons of Zebedee's mother was in Jesus' close entourage from Galilee through to Jerusalem (20:20; 27:55-56). Later he will take these three disciples from among the twelve to be with him in his hour of anguish at Gethsemane (26:37), as he does here (17:1). Peter is the clear leader of the twelve and takes the leading role at many moments. Through the revelation of the Father, he identifies Jesus as the Christ thereby becoming the foundation for his Church (16:16-19) but he also fails to understand Jesus' suffering (16:21-23), and abandons and denies Jesus three times during his passion (26:69-75). While the episode of his walking and faltering on the water (14:28-31) reflects the double profile of Peter, he is singularly privileged with divine revelation of Jesus' identity and is therefore a privileged witness for any possible manifestation on this seventh day.

BRINGING THEM UP

Jesus first takes the disciples with him and then brings them up. The Greek verb indicating this latter action is elsewhere more commonly used for offering sacrifice (active sense) or for initiating someone into the practice of sacrifice (intransitive sense). The context here implies the bringing of the disciples, but the connotation of offering is not out of place, given that mountain tops frequently

THE TRANSFIGURATION – A BIBLICAL MEDITATION

have sanctuaries or altars where sacrifices are offered. There is no animal or grain offering only Jesus and the three disciples. The group of four recall another group of four, Abraham, Isaac, and the two servant boys, who go to Mount Moriah to offer sacrifice. Whose sacrifice might the trip to this high mountain prefigure? It might be Jesus himself, especially given the recent first passion prediction (16:21) or it might be the disciples, whose future suffering has also been laid bare (16:24-26). The ambiguity in the translation of the verb and in the possible referents binds the fate of Jesus and the disciples very closely together. Jesus will lead and they will follow. Jesus will suffer, die, and be raised. The disciples will take up their cross, but they will also be recognised at the coming of the Son of Man. Jesus is to be the model for the disciples. The disciples are asked to take a lot on trust but also need reassurance. The episode of the transfiguration is a response to this need.

Jesus is with the disciples by themselves. Earlier Jesus withdrew to be by himself after the death of John the Baptist (14:3) and after the feeding of the multitude when he went up a mountain to pray (14:23). On this occasion and later when Jesus speaks most explicitly of his passion for the third and final time he takes the disciples aside by themselves (20:17-19). Prominent revelation often occurs when Jesus is either alone by himself or with his disciples (17:18-19; 24:3f). It is another signal to readers of the importance of what is about to transpire.

A VERY HIGH MOUNTAIN

The location is specified as a very high mountain. There are *seven* such mountains in Matthew's Gospel and they involve significant moments in Christ's life and ministry: the temptation (4:8); the sermon on the mount (5:1-8:1); prayer (14:23); the feeding of the multitude (15:29); the Transfiguration (17:1); the eschatological discourse (24:3); the commissioning of the apostles by the Risen Christ (28:16). In the ancient world where God was understood to dwell in the heavens above, mountains were considered points of close contact with the divine and were privileged sites for temples and sanctuaries. *Two* mountains of the Old Testament (OT) are closely associated with the divine presence, namely Mount Sinai/Horeb and Mount Zion.

God appears to Israel in thunder, fire, and cloud on Mount Sinai but to Moses in a burning bush (Exod 3-4). On Sinai God talks with Moses and gives the Law (Exod 19-24). Both Moses and Elijah get to see God on this mountain but not face to face. Moses is sheltered in the cleft of the rock by God's hand and Elijah hides beneath his cloak (Exod 33:18-23; 1 Kings 19:11-18). The

THE FURROW

mountain setting hints at an imminent divine manifestation and of divine instruction.

In New Testament times, Mount Zion is conceived as the cosmic centre, the point of entry into the heavenly sphere. The apocalyptic expectations will be centred on Zion and it is here that God will gather the righteous to live in his holy city at the day of judgement. Mount Zion is also conceived of as the focal point of salvation history and many events are clustered around Zion, from the creation of the world, the land that first appears to Noah after the flood, Mount Moriah where Isaac was to be sacrificed, the giving of the Law, the theophanies to Moses and Elijah, and the first and second Temples. In short, *all* salvation history converged on Zion and so it became the expected location for all future divine interventions. Unlike the popular tradition which employs the name “Tabor”, Matthew doesn’t specify any name for this mountain, which allows it to be more readily associated with the Sinai / Zion tradition as is evidenced in many of the commentaries of the Church Fathers on this passage.

TRANSFIGURED

The scene suddenly alters. Jesus becomes transfigured, literally undergoes a metamorphosis, before them. The Greek verb *metamorphō* denotes a transformation, usually into something more beautiful and grace filled. The brightness is confirmed by extravagant comparisons used to describe how brilliantly and dazzlingly white Jesus became: his face shines like the sun and his clothes are as white as pure light. The description closely resembles the angel of the Lord who rolled back the stone from the tomb at the resurrection. However, while the angel’s appearance was like lightning and his clothes as white as snow, Jesus’ brightness is of a more superlative quality leaving the angel comparatively speaking in the shade! Jesus began his mission in Zebulun and Naphtali, which Matthew views as the fulfilment of Isaiah’s prophecy: “Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.” (4:15-16). The promised light is now manifest on the mountain. It is striking that there is no physical description of the Risen Jesus at the tomb or in Galilee. Only the reaction of the disciples is recorded. The glorious light prophesied by Isaiah is beheld here at the mountain of the Transfiguration.

White is a *full* colour that reflects the complete spectrum of light. The rainbow the sign of God’s first covenant with Noah is

THE TRANSFIGURATION – A BIBLICAL MEDITATION

condensed in Jesus to the pure white light that causes the rainbow to exist. The dark absorbs all light and reflects nothing. The dark red blood, though it might remind us of Jesus' passion, is an inappropriate colour for Jesus as he will triumph over death. His clothing's colour is the glowing full white of the resurrection. White is also the heavenly colour, that of the angels and of those who inhabit heaven. The white colour points to Jesus' heavenly origin and destiny.

MOSES AND ELIJAH WITH JESUS

The verb to indicate the appearance is commonly employed for divine manifestations in both the Old and New Testaments. Moses and Elijah are the *principal* prophets of the OT and of popular tradition. The conclusion of the last book of the OT, that of the prophet Malachi, references both the law given to Moses at Horeb/Sinai and the coming of the prophet Elijah before the definitive day of the Lord. The appearance of both prophets signals that the time of God's great salvific intervention is signalled as *imminent*.

Both prophets are associated with impressive divine manifestations occurring on high mountains. Elijah is especially associated with fire, which he calls down on his offering, or on the soldiers of the King come to fetch him, or at the end of his life on earth when he rides into heaven in a blazing chariot. Elijah now stands beside the source of light that lights the fire of his ministry. Moses stands beside the source of the fire of the burning bush. Jesus shines on them both. They talk with him. This is important to retain. The words of Moses and Elijah stem from divine conversation. They have come from conversation with God in the OT and now from Jesus in the New. Their words expressed in the Law (Moses) and Prophets (Elijah) are a sure guide to the source of life and light.

PETER'S JOY

Peter address to Jesus: "Lord, it is wonderful for us to be here" might be repeated by all who read the Gospel of Matthew and learn of this special encounter. Readers can share fully in the sentiment of these words and make these words their own. It truly is wonderful to be here. Peter uses the title *Kyrie* for Jesus which is ambiguous and could simply signify "Sir" but in this setting, the title is better rendered "Lord", a term that accords Jesus the title of the Lord God in the OT. Peter asks that he make three tents, one for Jesus, who he addresses in the second person, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. He intends to prolong the experience, by making a

THE FURROW

home for each of them, so that they might dwell alongside him and among the disciples. Jesus and the two prophets are to form part of the disciples' camp; indeed, they are to be the principal axes of the camp with Jesus at the centre. The triple mention of tents reminds us of the camp of the Israelites in the desert. Jesus has come among his people – or as the Gospel of John puts it, the Word “lived among us” – or more literally “has pitched his tent among us” (John 1:14).

There is a suggestion that Peter's words don't quite match the situation. He proposes tents which would recall the tent of meeting of the OT where the cloud would descend, and Moses would enter to talk to God. The tent of meeting is a place of communication between God and humanity. Peter wishes to prolong the wonderful communication. It is *surprising* that he suggests three tents, thereby putting Moses and Elijah on a par with Jesus. Peter appears to be slow to understand who Jesus is, despite this glorious manifestation. Both Moses and Elijah have already ascended to heaven, but Jesus is among them and now revealed as sharing in the heavenly glory already on earth.

OVERSHADOWING CLOUD AND VOICE

The proposal to build a tent for Jesus now seems somewhat ridiculous, since a luminous *cloud* completely overshadows them. They who would build a tent for Jesus are themselves provided with a greater heavenly tent. A cloud is a frequent harbinger of a manifestation of God, either in the camp or with Moses on the mountain. The disciples are now cut off from the rest of the earth by the cloud. The cloud's shadow is not dark but luminous, emitting a bright light. Under this cloud, Peter, James, and John have a foretaste of the light that is prophesied by Isaiah (Isa 8:22-9:1; Matt 4:15-16). The disciples are called to be the light of the world (5:14) and are to let their light shine so that others may see and give glory to God the Father in heaven (5:16). Here on the mountain under the cloud, they are invested with this light, which they will radiate in the world (5:14) and to all people (5:16).

A *voice* speaks much as it had done at the baptism from the heavens (3:17). This time the source of the voice is no longer from the heavens but from the cloud which envelops them. The words are much the same: “this is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.” but on this occasion there is a direct injunction to the disciples: “listen to him.” Jesus is presented as Son, but God asks now for the implications of this to be *lived out* by the disciples. He is to be listened to, as the prophets, Moses, and Elijah and more than them, he is to be listened to because of his status as Son. This

THE TRANSFIGURATION – A BIBLICAL MEDITATION

command further recalls the Lord's injunction in Deuteronomy to listen to the prophet like Moses that he will raise up (Deut 18:15-18). This is the climax of the transfiguration. The disciples are told to listen to Jesus and yet he says nothing at this point. Readers of the Gospel must go back six days to the discussion of Jesus' identity and mission and to the discussion of the future role of the disciples, a role modelled on that of the Son, involving suffering and glory. The vision points especially to the future glory, a glory in which disciples will be acknowledged by the coming Son of Man. The command to listen recalls the recent words of Jesus that are to be taken on board. Discipleship leads to fullness of life and glory, but it also involves the way of the cross.

THE DISCIPLES' REACTION

The disciples hear and by falling on their faces adopt Jesus' stance in his prayer to the Father at Gethsemane (26:39). While many will worship Jesus through the course of Gospel, the specific action (falling on their faces) mentioned here is performed only by Jesus himself. The stance of the disciples is a *positive* indicator of the beginnings of an appropriate response to the events on the mountain, namely a response of prayer. The wondrous experience provokes great fear, a typical response to a divine manifestation, which here involves both Jesus and God. When Jesus manifests his sovereignty over the waters by walking on the sea, the disciples fear greatly (14:22-33) and when Jesus' divinity is manifested through the wondrous events at his death, the centurion and soldiers fear greatly and say that he was the Son of God (27:54). The disciples undergo *change* through this encounter on the mountain, as is evidenced by their actions and strong emotional response. Jesus comes to them and touches them and calls on them to arise and not to fear. The very human action of Jesus to approach and touch and the simple words of reassurance allow disciples and readers to reconnect with the Jesus that they have come to know through the ministry in Galilee. The vision of the glorified one is none other than Jesus.

ALONE WITH JESUS AGAIN

Suddenly the disciples looking around see only Jesus. They are just as they were when they first went up the mountain with Jesus. There is no change in the overall situation at a purely objective level. They will even retrace their steps down the mountain back to the plain. There is a strong sense of a return to the regular ministry of Jesus. However, this episode though has left them changed.

THE FURROW

They are in a certain sense also transfigured. Jesus orders them to tell no one what they saw until the Son of Man should rise from the dead (17:9). In response they ask about Elijah (17:10). The vision they have seen, they cannot yet fully comprehend.

Readers might recognise in this encounter a preview of the Cross and Resurrection. The glorified Jesus is not only to be found in the Resurrection accounts but through the Gospel. Matthew views Jesus as the fulfilment of Isaiah 7:14, the Emmanuel prophecy (1:23), that in Jesus God is with us. Furthermore, Matthew records Jesus' promise at the end of the Gospel, that he will be with his disciples always until the end of time (28:20) and includes Jesus' teaching on how when two or three disciples gather in Jesus' name in prayer, there he will be also (18:20). The account of the transfiguration might be taken as an example of such a small gathering where Jesus the Lord makes himself present and how through that encounter disciples are transfigured.

INVITATION TO PRAY AND GROW

The Gospel of the Transfiguration is an invitation to us to join in prayer with Jesus, to allow oneself to be carried up the mountain to behold his glory. The dazzling and the cloud make it hard to see, but it is still a wonderful place to be and one would wish to prolong it, as Peter proposed, by making a tent for Jesus to dwell in. The moment passes to come down, but all is not the same. Each time in prayer there is change *within*, the heart is modified, perhaps invisibly so, but the change occurs, nonetheless. By regularly finding a special place and time, tents can be made in one's heart. Such prayer of the heart with the knowledge of Jesus dwelling within is the life goal of every Christian. Such prayer cannot be forced but wells up from within and will take however long it takes. Benedict, practiced in prayer, says that such prayer is brief. It cannot be forced or prolonged, though the more time and space we give the more chance for it to emerge and transform.