

THE TRANSFIGURATION OF CHRIST

Epiphany 7 Year A – Transfiguration

Ex. 24:12-18; Ps. 2 or Ps. 99; 2 Pt. 1:16-21; Mt. 17:1-9

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Society in our modern twenty-first century lives for the spectacular. No longer are we satisfied with the ordinary, everyday, boring stuff of life. Everything has to be bigger, brighter and more stunning. Every four years, the opening of the Olympic Games has to be more spectacular. In the world of movies, modern directors try to outdo themselves with special effects, that force us to suspend any logical sense of belief or rational thought—as super-heroes defy the laws of physics and biology and unbelievable scenarios are seen as normal escapist entertainment.

We stand in awe of the spectacular. The spectacular captures our imagination and enables us to dream of wondrous glory. Sometimes, however, it takes the spectacular to shake us out of our complacency or to reveal life's realities. Many of the Old Testament prophets were confronted by the spectacular as they prayed or even slept. Some were caught up in visions of heaven or saw strange creatures. The spectacular, for them, was a source of fear and awe, because it generally meant personal contact with Almighty God—and that wasn't always a pleasant experience.

In the gospel accounts, we also encounter some of the spectacular—people are healed, demons are cast out, people's lives are dramatically changed—but there is not so much of the bright lights and loud thunder claps that we might normally associate with the spectacular. For us, however, the spectacular is purely a source of entertainment. No longer do we expect God to act in the spectacular.

In the portion of Matthew's account of the gospel that we heard this morning, however, we are confronted by a spectacular event in the life of Jesus and some of his disciples, namely Peter, James and John. Some of us might ask if the event, known as the Transfiguration of Jesus, really happened. Is it fact or fancy? What does the What does it tell us about Jesus—and what has it got to say to us today?

Leaving aside, for a moment, the historical authenticity of the event in question—in the light of the events that followed, the transfiguration takes on tremendous significance. When we take a closer look at it—when we delve into its depths—we indeed find that it does has far reaching repercussions for our understanding of Jesus Christ and his relationship with us.

To understand the Transfiguration, however, we have to go beyond the immediate events that happened and look at the context into which it is placed. The first thing that we note here is that the Transfiguration must be seen in the context of Peter's earlier declaration about Jesus.

The events, as they are recorded here, come just a few days after Jesus' question to Peter: "Who do you say that I am?" What follows, is Peter's monumental declaration: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Peter, inspired by the Holy Spirit at last confessed his belief that Jesus was the Christ—the long awaited Messiah of the Hebrew people. As such, Peter's confession not only represents the watershed of the Apostle's own faith but in fact embodies the faith of the whole Church.

It's at the point of Peter's confession that the faith of the Apostles reaches its pinnacle—its highest and most glorious point. With Peter as their spokesman, they had just confessed the most profound truth of all time—that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. From this point on, we rarely read of their faith in this way, only of their doubts and fears.

It is at that point—the point of Peter's confession—that the Church came into existence. This confessional statement, that Jesus is the Christ, is the foundation upon which the Church stands. This is the rock upon which Jesus Christ builds his Church.

Peter's confession of Jesus' identity as the long-awaited Messiah, also shows that the identity of the Messiah is no longer rooted in the sufferings and expectations of Israel but in Jesus Christ, himself. For centuries, Israel had placed its hope in the coming Messiah. In their suffering, they would cry out to God: "How long, O Lord, will it be, until you send your Messiah to save us?" "How long will it be until you bring in your kingdom?"

Now, they need no longer to cry out to God in this way. They must now find their realisation of the Messiah in the person and history of Jesus of Nazareth. The Kingdom of God has come.

However, along with the joy of Peter's declaration, there is also a very sobering aspect to it. Amidst the revelation and joy of Peter's confession there is also an element of darkness. The revelation of Jesus as the Christ is now contrasted with Jesus' foretelling of his own death and resurrection. While it was good news for humanity, Peter's confession represented suffering and death for Jesus.

A few days later then, after Jesus, Peter, James and John had walked up a mountain, Jesus was transfigured before them. The word used is the same word from which we derive the word metamorphosis. A change had come over Jesus. His face and clothes became dazzling white and shone before them. And then two other figures also appeared with him. We are told that they were Moses and Elijah.

What, then, does this transfiguration reveal to us about the person and work of Jesus Christ, now? Well, just as Peter's confession of Jesus also pointed to Jesus' suffering and death, so the Transfiguration of Jesus also points to his suffering, death and resurrection, as God's plan of salvation of humanity.

What Peter had previously declared with his mouth is now visually and orally attested to in a supernatural way. Even though Peter had been thinking merely in human terms, he understood who Jesus was. His confession was then confirmed by the heavenly voice, which said: "This is my beloved Son; with him I am well pleased." And while Jesus was a man among men and the representation of our humanity, the Transfiguration points to the special relationship he had with God, as God's Son, who will carry out God's plan of salvation...for us.

We also see here a movement from an understanding of Jesus as the Son of God to Jesus as also the son of Man—the representative of all humanity—the one upon whom all the sin of the world is to be laid. So, while Peter's confession points to Jesus as the Son of God, the Transfiguration points to Jesus' own self-identification as the Son of Man, who suffers, is killed, and is vindicated by God through the resurrection. Accordingly, then, the ministry of Christ is confirmed by God.

So, why then, should Jesus be seen talking with Moses and Elijah? Well, the Transfiguration also points to Jesus as the fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets and as being superior to them. We see that theme all through the book of Hebrews, don't we?

Moses represents the Law of God, delivered at Mount Sinai. He represents the Scriptures, primarily the first five books of the Old Testament, that speak of the history of the people of Israel. More importantly, it speaks of God's special relationship with Israel, and the basis upon which that relationship rests.

Elijah, on the other hand, represents the prophets of Israel, who continually called the people back into right relationship with God. The prophets were the spokesmen and women of God.

Together, Moses and Elijah were the supreme representatives of God's covenant relationship with Israel and were the embodiment of their Scriptures. Yet, Jesus is superior to the Law and the Prophets. While the Law and the Prophets merely *point* to the Messiah, Jesus is their fulfilment. Jesus is the one to whom the Law and the Prophets look. Hence, their presence was also an assurance to Jesus and the apostles of the rightness of his path to the cross.

Finally, the transfiguration points to the resurrection and the second coming of Christ in glory. The Transfiguration of Jesus and the cameo appearances of Moses and Elijah, gave the apostles—and us—a glimpse of Jesus Christ in his heavenly glory. As such, it points to, and promises, his resurrection and glorious coming again.

The revelation of Jesus Christ that proceeds from the Transfiguration points, therefore, to who Jesus Christ is for us—the one through whom God planned and executes our salvation and that of all humanity. The Transfiguration, confirms for us, Jesus as the awaited Messiah and indicates God's plan of salvation, through Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection.

Jesus is the one, who, although is truly divine, shares our humanity.

Yes, God does still speak to us through the spectacular—the spectacular that is far more than entertainment—and should impact on our lives in a real and tangible way. The transfiguration points to God's inestimable love for us as his creatures who come to him empty-handed—who have nothing to offer in return but worship.

At the end of this passage we find the apostles, once again, alone with Jesus. The Christ, who at the end stands alone, is the only source of our confidence and hope—the only one through whom we might be saved.

To him be all glory, honour, majesty and power. Amen.