

## 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. This event 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 read for our Gospel today.

The **Feast of the Transfiguration**, a Prayer Book feast, had its origins in the *Eastern Church*, perhaps tracing its beginning to the first church built on Mt. Tabor in the 4<sup>th</sup> century which was, according to tradition, dedicated on August 6<sup>th</sup>. Initially, it was as an unofficial, local feast; however, by the year 1000 it had become widely adopted in the *Eastern Church* but not introduced into the *Western Church* until four centuries later.

Indeed, it was on August 6<sup>th</sup>, 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 6<sup>th</sup> the year before, 1456.

As to where the **Transfiguration** took place, there is still much controversy today.

One setting for the **Transfiguration** is **Mt. Hermon**, near Caesarea Philippi, where many **New Testament** events took place. As the location is described as an *exceeding high mountain*, **Mt. Hermon** best fits the description — it is roughly 9000 feet high with its southern slopes extending into the Golan Heights.

However, traditionally the location has been **Mt. Tabor**, since in the third century **Origen** had supposed it to be the site of the **Transfiguration**. But **Mt. Tabor**, which is located in lower Galilee at the eastern end of the Jezreel Valley is only about 2000 feet high, not really a high mountain and is in the opposite direction from **Mt. Hermon**, and, at that time, it was topped by a fortress — not really a place of solitude.

So, with that as background, we come to that moment in Jesus' ministry when just a week earlier, he had announced to his disciples that he was going to Jerusalem to die, an announcement not well received and much misunderstood, and, as was customary for our Lord, he sought a place of solitude to pray and took Peter, James, and John with him into a high mountain. The three disciples became drowsy and fell asleep only to be awakened by voices, and as we heard in our Gospel passage, awakening to see Jesus transfigured and conversing with Moses and Elijah.

Mark, in his Gospel account, says the garments of Jesus became shining. The words he uses paints a picture for the reader, where we can see in our minds the rays of brightness darting from our Lord's Body and his clothes bright as the sun at noonday — not as if light were shining on him; rather, that the light was emanating from within him.

And there is Matthew's account where he described it similarly as the face of Jesus shining with a dazzling glory equal to the sun shining in its full strength — rays of glory darting through his flesh and clothes.

Appearing with Jesus were 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, discussing the ordeal that was to come and the death of our Lord. They too appeared in glory but no way to be compared to that glory with which Jesus appeared.

To the three disciples, Moses and Elijah seemed to be assenting to and acknowledging God's approval to the course Jesus had chosen, a reassurance that the **Cross** was what all of history had been leading up to, that is, the inevitability and the righteousness of the **Cross**.

At this moment, the three disciples, whose hearts had been shattered when Jesus told them his purpose for going to Jerusalem, were reassured by the voice of God acknowledging Jesus as his Son in the presence of Moses and Elijah.

*This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased: hear ye him.*

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 disciples. 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 the **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 his 2<sup>nd</sup> Letter to the 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, in whom I am well pleased: 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 General Epistle, the first chapter, 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 — simply, the need to pray, to communicate with his Father in Heaven through prayer.

Thus, 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.

We should well remember that our Lord not only provided us with the perfect example of prayer-life but also provided us with the perfect prayer. We call it the **Lord's 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, prayer is a duty; a transforming duty; indeed, a *transfiguring* duty, if we take the meaning of the word *transfigure* — that is, to change the appearance or form, denoting that that which is changed takes on a new aspect — we, too, can be transfigured, transformed through prayer.

Just as for Jesus Christ, prayer was an intimate communication between him and the Father, so it can be for us, too.

On the mountain, at that moment in time, something extraordinary happened, beyond our comprehension as human beings. The three disciples themselves, Peter, James, and John, were at a loss for words and what they witnessed then and there, we, today, must take to heart on Faith.

Faith, not seeking empirical evidence but Faith that defines the depth of our relationship with God and his Son Jesus Christ.

At the heart of Faith is **Love**: God's **Love** of all his **Creation** and that **Love** returned from each creature, especially from us made in his **Image** — our **love** returned to our **Creator**.

As we reflect upon the **Transfiguration**, what is also revealed to us is that this wonderful intimacy which God holds dear in his relationship with his only-begotten Son, not only revealed but extended to each of us as his adopted children.

Truly, as Peter, James, and John were witnesses to that intimate relationship God has with his Son, so we who have accepted Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour, through his **Death** and **Resurrection**, have the same extended to us, extended through **Divine Love**, a wonderful, intimate relationship with our Heavenly Father — a relationship through which we can experience a transformation, a transfiguring of ourselves, our lives, our hearts, our souls, our very being, extending to us the joy of eternal life.