

Feast of the Transfiguration

Lk 9.28-36

I'm going to talk about an aspect of the transfiguration that I don't think receives nearly as much attention as it deserves. In particular, I'd like us to reflect on what we might call the obscurity of the transfiguration, or maybe the opacity of the transfiguration.

Now that may sound like a very strange thing for me to say. Ordinarily we think of the transfiguration as an act of divine self-revelation. We think of it as light instead of dark, as translucent rather than opaque. We think of it in terms of disclosure rather than concealment.

But of course the reason we think of it in these terms is because we live on this side of the resurrection. Prior to the Lord's death and resurrection, the transfiguration was a confusing event, even a disturbing one. Peter's so frightened when it happens he starts babbling, and all three disciples are terrified as they enter the cloud of the presence of the Lord. Afterwards, Luke says, they kept silent and told no one what they had seen. Both in Matthew and in Mark, Jesus goes so far as to tell the disciples not to discuss the matter with anyone until after the Son of Man had been raised from the dead, and they of course have no idea what he's talking about.

So I think we need to be cautious about approaching this story with the expectation that it clearly and unequivocally shows us is an instance of the self-revelation of the incarnate Word of God. Of course, it *is* that, but what it shows us is that the revelation of the Word of God will probably disconcert us at least as much as it reassures us.

"But wait a minute," you say, "we live on *this* side of the resurrection; you just said so. Now that the Son of Man has been raised from the dead, we *know* what the transfiguration was about."

Not so fast. We *do* live on this side of the resurrection, but even the resurrection, like the transfiguration, was an event that was initially confusing and disturbing. Remember how the disciples reacted? Did they recognize him right away? No. Were they immediately reassured and comforted by his return? No; they were afraid.

The revelation of the Word of God is always traumatic because it always means change, and not just minor change, but *radical* change. It means the complete transfiguration of our way of thinking, our way of living, our way of being in the world. And more often than not, we are not ready for that.

Resurrection is good news only to those who are already dead. Transfiguration is good news only for those who know themselves to be caught up entirely in the divine life of God. Otherwise, both resurrection and transfiguration will only appear confusing and even frightening.

There's another theme that's associated with the transfiguration that is often overlooked: in all three of the gospels that include an account of the transfiguration, this event occurs right about the same time Jesus begins to teach his disciples that he is going to be betrayed and killed. In Luke's version, Jesus comes down from the mountain, delivers a boy from an unclean spirit, and

then immediately tells his disciples, “Let these words sink into your ears: the Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands.” And then, just a few verses later, Luke tells us Jesus knew the time was drawing near for him to be taken up, so he sets his face to go to Jerusalem.

Seeing the transfiguration properly required the resurrection; seeing the resurrection properly required the cross. Recognizing the revelation of the Word of God—let alone understanding it—requires sharing in the oblation of the Word himself.

This was the part Peter missed: he wanted the transfiguration without the cross. He saw the transfiguration as a revelation of glory, but he was not prepared to see the glory of the light shining from Jesus illuminating the even-more resplendent glory of the cross. He knew in part, but he would come to know in full only as he followed Jesus along the path that led down the mountain, to Jerusalem, to Golgotha, and then to an empty tomb and the new life of the resurrected Lord.

The same is true for us. Oftentimes, we want the light without the darkness. We want the transfiguration, but we’re less inclined to embrace the cross. We’d love to build some tabernacles and stay on the mountain with Jesus, but he calls us down from the mountain and tells us to follow him to Jerusalem.

But—as St. Paul put it—if we share with him in his death, will we not also share with him in his new life? This is why the ministry of the Holy Spirit is so essential: it is through the Spirit that we are joined to Christ. It is through the Spirit that we recognize the living presence of the transfigured and risen Christ present to us today. Seeing the transfiguration required the cross, and seeing the cross required the resurrection, and understanding the resurrection required Pentecost and the ministry of the Spirit. It all fits together.

So let us pray for the grace to see Christ transfigured in our own day and in our own lives. Let us pray for the mercy to offer ourselves to him and thereby become a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, that we might also be transfigured not only in our minds but our hearts and our wills and our bodies, so that the world might know that in him is life and that his life is the life of all people, to the honor and glory of his Name. Amen.

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