

THE TRANSFIGURATION OF OUR LORD

Daniel 7. 9-10

2 Peter 1. 16-19

Luke 9. 28-36

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

St Luke's account of the transfiguration of our Lord is one of the most elusive and evocative scenes in his Gospel. The passage that we have before us today reports a mysterious event during the ministry of Jesus.

The transfiguration scene is actually composed of six elements: Christ's withdrawal to the mountain to pray with the three disciples (v. 28); the transfiguration itself (v. 29); the appearance of Moses and Elijah (vv. 30-33a); St Peter's response (v. 33b); the voice from the cloud (vv. 34-35); and finally, the disciples' response. The structure of the scene moves between revelatory disclosures and responses from the disciples. In this respect, it continues the pattern that we have already seen in St Luke's Gospel, where questions have been raised about our Lord's identity, answers have been offered, and the disciples have been sent out on mission and taught about the meaning of discipleship. The transfiguration therefore clarifies Jesus' identity (especially his divine sonship), foreshadows his exaltation in heaven, and continues the training of Christ's disciples.

Luke's hand is evident in each of the elements of this scene that we have just listed. In the introduction, Luke follows St Mark's Gospel in noting that after some days, our Lord took three of the disciples and went up on the mountain. In Luke's account, this scene occurs about a week after St Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ; and Luke specifically mentions that Christ's withdrawal to the mountain¹ is

¹ The precise location of the mountain is not given in any of the Gospels.

for the purpose of prayer. Just as Luke's account of our Lord's baptism has the voice from heaven occur as Jesus is praying, so also now the transfiguration and the voice from the cloud occur in the context of prayer.

The transfiguration itself is narrated briefly. Luke omits Mark's suggestion of a metamorphosis, saying instead that 'the appearance of Christ's face changed' while he was praying, and his clothing became 'dazzling white'. In this way, Luke underscores the power of prayer to mediate the presence of God. Like Moses, who was so radiant when he descended from Mt Sinai that the Israelites could not look at him, so our Lord's appearance confirmed his presence with God. In this context, however, the transfiguration is not only to be understood as a sign of God's presence with Jesus; it is a further disclosure of Jesus' identity as God's Son; and foreshadows his resurrection and ascension.²

Two men suddenly appear and are talking with Christ: Moses and Elijah, who are frequently said to represent the Law and the Prophets. In Luke's account, Moses and Elijah appear in 'glory', and later (in v. 32) the disciples see our Lord's 'glory'. Luke has put references to 'glory' to his account of the transfiguration, whereas that of Mark has none. In Luke's eyes, the transfiguration foreshadows not only Jesus's resurrection and ascension in glory, but also his return in glory (24. 26; 2 Pet 1. 17).

Peter and the others have been sleeping while Jesus prayed, but rouse themselves in time to see Christ's glory, Moses and Elijah speaking with him, and their departure from him. Once Moses and Elijah leave, Peter responds, suggesting that they build three 'booths' or dwellings there. Peter has only partially grasped the significance of the event. He wants to freeze the moment and commemorate the place; yet as we now know, true faithfulness is not a question of commemorating the place of the transfiguration, but of following our Lord to the cross.

² The two men who appeared to the disciples at Jesus' ascension were also clad in white robes (Acts 1. 10).

In Luke's Gospel, the book of Acts and in other biblical accounts, clouds serve to manifest and conceal the presence of God.³ A cloud overshadows Jesus and the disciples, and God speaks from the cloud.⁴ His voice gives a climactic affirmation of Christ's identity: 'This is my Son, my Chosen'; an affirmation that echoes two verses from the Old Testament.⁵ Earlier, at the baptism of Christ, God had spoken to his Son alone, saying, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased'. Now, allowing the other disciples to hear, God pronounces the fullest answer to the question of our Lord's identity: Jesus is both the unique Son and the chosen Servant in whom God delights, and through whom he will bring salvation to the nations.

As he speaks, God commands the disciples to listen to Christ. This injunction to listen occurs right after our Lord's first prediction of his passion and his teachings on discipleship. The command to listen to Jesus may also be related to the role of Moses and Elijah in this scene; because immediately after God speaks from the cloud, Luke reports that Christ was found alone. Moses and Elijah have departed; indicating that our Lord has superseded the Law and the Prophets.

As our scene comes to a close, the disciples keep silent about the transfiguration without having to be told. The full meaning of the transfiguration will not become fully apparent to them until Jesus has died and been resurrected in Jerusalem.

The account of the transfiguration records the kind of experience that only a privileged few ever had in the entire history of Israel and the early Church. Mystics and saints have lived lives of disciplined piety in hopes of attaining such a beatific vision of God. Others of us – ordinary mortals that we are – have also had experiences and moments when we have distinctly sensed or felt God's presence with us.

³ Cf. Ex 16. 10, 19. 9, 24. 15-18, 33. 9-11.

⁴ As at Mt Sinai (Ex 19. 16-20).

⁵ Ps 2. 7 and Is 42. 1.

In the transfiguration we, along with the disciples, witness a such a moment in Christ's life. In this one scene, as our Lord stands in the very presence of God, a mosaic of the Gospel is presented to us. We hear echoes of the baptism of Jesus, his passion predictions, his fulfilment of the Law and the prophets, his death and resurrection, and his ascension and future coming. And God's voice, heard from the cloud, only serves to underscore the importance of what is happening through, and because of the ministry of Christ.

The dangers of such heaven-like experiences, perhaps because they are so rare, are that we may either fail to learn from them as we ought; or that we may want to make them the norm and withdraw from the day-to-day struggle that fills most of life.

The disciples wanted to build dwellings and stay on the mountaintop, but they could not stop time or live on in the radiance of that moment. Discipleship involves following and going on. As much as the disciples were awed by what they had seen, they were not yet ready to be witnesses for our Lord. Only later – after further following, after the grief of the cross and the joy of the resurrection, and after the coming of the Holy Spirit – were they ready to speak about what God has done in Jesus. Faithfulness is not achieved by freezing a moment, but by following on in confidence that God is leading, and trusting that what lies ahead is even greater than what we have already experienced.

The scene of the transfiguration is fundamental to our Christian faith, because it emphasises that God has been revealed through Christ; and it brings the true identity of our Lord to focus. Jesus's identity and work cannot, however, be understood apart from the cross and the resurrection. It is in this light that the significance of Christ is best understood.

So should we desire and expect visions and revelations from God in our own time? Yes, of course we should! Dreams, epiphanies and visions can give new meaning to our Christian understanding and experience; but they also point us back, do they not, to the reality of our day-to-day walk in discipleship. This reality also gives purpose to our lives.

The view from the mountain may indeed be majestic; but the road in the valley beckons to us. Thanks be to God: we can be reassured as we come down from the mountain, because we know that there will be other vistas and other transforming experiences ahead.

Amen.