

## CHRIST'S UNVEILED GLORY

Daniel 7. 9-10, 13-14

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.

Accounts of our Lord's transfiguration are given in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, and they all agree on the following points: Jesus goes up on a mountaintop; he takes Peter, James and John with him; his face changes and, along with his clothes, begins to shine very brightly. Moses and Elijah appear and are seen to speak with Christ; a cloud descends; and God's voice is heard, saying, 'This is my son; listen to him.'

Now how do we make sense of all that? In the account of the transfiguration, God is telling us something about our Lord. He is giving us, as it were, a 'peek behind the veil'. And as with all wondrous things about Jesus before his death and resurrection, we are only getting a small glimpse of his glory. But let us not be mistaken; what we see in the transfiguration is more than a shining face. There are all sorts of clues here that lead us deeper and deeper into the mystery of Christ's glory.

Firstly, there is the appearance of Moses and Elijah. These two men are mammoth figures in the history of Israel. You could have asked any Jewish child in Jesus's day and they would have told you the stories of Moses parting the Red Sea and bringing down the stone tablets of the Law written with God's own finger. They would also have told you about God consuming the priests of Baal in an inferno; about Elijah slaughtering the pagan priests; and about his riding up to heaven in a chariot. Moses and Elijah are spiritual giants who walked the earth at the birthing and evolution of

the Jewish nation. And significantly, in the popular Jewish imagination these two figures came to embody all the Law and all the prophets.

So these two giants of Israel are seen to be speaking with our Lord, this miracle worker who sometimes described himself as the Master of the Law rather than a follower of it. And Jesus, this teacher, was also sometimes bold enough to dispute with the interpreters of the prophets, that is, the scribes, priests and Pharisees. In this transfiguration scene, Christ is seen to be talking with the Law giver himself (Moses) and to the greatest prophet (Elijah), whose appearing was said to foretell the coming of the Messiah.<sup>1</sup> Here, in this dazzling scene on the top of a mountain, we have all the Law and all the prophets looking towards our Lord.

Moses used to talk to God face to face, and afterwards his face glowed with God's reflected glory. It frightened the people so much that when Moses turned to address them, he would cover his face with a veil. And Elijah's ascension into heaven was accomplished through God's intervention; a conveyance was sent down to carry him up into the sky. But Jesus's glory is different. His face glows, but it can't be hidden by a veil; and indeed his very clothes shine as brightly as his face does. This is not reflected glory that comes from speaking with God; this is *inner* glory bursting out because he *is* God. And later on, when Christ will ascend into heaven, it won't be by way of a heavenly conveyance, but by his own will and power.

The reflected glory of God on Moses and the glorious departure of the prophet Elijah into heaven are single incidents in time and history. Our Lord's glory, on the other hand, is not bound by time or space. It reaches way back, far beyond Elijah and beyond Moses to a time before time, to Jesus's eternal begotten-ness. There never was a time when Christ was not.<sup>2</sup> And our Lord's glory reaches forward in time, from this scene of the transfiguration to his resurrection and ascension; and it

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Mal 4. 5-6.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Jn 1. 1, 3, 14.

will reach beyond us to that future moment when he will return again in astounding glory: that moment when the trumpets will blast, and the earth will tremble with the opening of graves and the rising of the dead to the life immortal.

*That* is the glory that Peter, James and John glimpse on the mountaintop. So can they be blamed for being puzzled? Peter says, ‘Master, it is good for us to be here: and let us make three booths; one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.’ He wants to hold onto this moment; to fix it in time and space. As the three disciples witnessed this incredible scene, and as they saw their Master, the one whom Peter had just confessed as being the Messiah, speaking with the Law-giver and the most important prophet, the one whose appearing would assure the Jewish nation that the Messiah had come, perhaps they thought, ‘It can get no better than this; the kingdom we have been waiting for is here.’

Jesus does not rebuke Peter’s suggestion, as inappropriate as it is. The corrective comes rather from God himself who says, ‘This is my beloved son; listen to him’. God the Father knows that his Son’s glory is more than this flash of transfiguration in the sky. No, Christ’s glory will have to reach beyond this moment; and it will reach in particular to one place, the cross.

Here we come to a very fundamental truth about the glory of our Lord, and it is my second point. Jesus’s glory and his Passion are connected. The two are not separate; they are one. As terrible as it was, three o’clock on Good Friday afternoon was Christ’s finest hour. The glory which manifested itself in our Lord’s transfiguration – that is, the shining forth of his deity through his humanity – was supremely at work as he hung on the cross.<sup>3</sup> The crucifixion is an offence in every possible way; and yet it remains the perfect symbol of Jesus, his faithfulness to his Father and his love

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Jn 17. 1, 4-5.

for humankind. The cross is not the tragic ending to the otherwise blessed and glorious life of Christ; the cross is the very culmination of his identity and mission.

And then, we are told that this glorious moment passes. The light fades and our Lord is the same person that he always was. Jesus and his disciples begin their lonely trek down the mountain so that they can then walk towards Jerusalem. That is the last we ever hear of the transfiguration until many, many years later, when Peter recalls the event in a letter he wrote near the end of his life to those in the churches (and I quote) ‘who have received a faith as precious as ours’ (1. 1) He writes, ‘For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honour and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, “This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain. So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.’

One of the last words our Lord ever says to us in Scripture, in the last verses of the book of Revelation, are ‘I am the root and the descendant of David, (I am) the bright and *morning star*’ (22. 16). There are those who do not recognise our Saviour in this way; and for them, his light cannot be seen as shining from within them. But let us, dear friends, even now allow the light of Jesus to shine from our own hearts. Let us allow it to break into us; to burst out of us. Let us allow the love and glory of Christ to rise in our hearts and to illuminate us. The glory of the Lord has risen upon us; let us arise and shine, for our light has come.<sup>4</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Is 60. 1.