

Transfiguration as Transformation
Transfiguration of the Lord - Year B - 02/14/2021

Psalm Reading: 50:1-6

1st Reading: 2 Kings 2:12 and 2 Cor. 4:3-6 , 2nd: Mark 9:2-9

In our Gospel reading, Jesus goes up to a high mountain and brings with him three of the leading disciples. Of course Peter is there, but also James and John. And somewhere along the path, Mark tells us in chapter 9 verse 2, “he [Jesus] was transfigured before them.” Well this is an interesting sentence! Jesus was transfigured. What does that really mean in the context of the time, and what does it mean to us in our own day?

This scene we just read from Mark has, for centuries, been called “The Transfiguration” and we have a special day in the Church calendar to celebrate it. Today, as a matter of fact. So this transfiguration thing must be important right? You all know by now how interested I am in etymology, so it should be no surprise that I decided to dig a bit deeper into this word, “transfigured”. In order to understand it I thought we should break it down. Just off the top of my head, I think change is implied by the prefix “trans”, and “figure”? the word “figure” has to do with appearance or perhaps understanding. Seems straightforward enough, Jesus changes his appearance.

Well, you know in my younger days, probably my early twenties, I did something to change my appearance. Ever since I was a boy I had been parting my hair on the left and plopping it over to the right. Well, one morning after a haircut, I was combing my hair in front of the mirror and just for fun I parted

it in the middle. Not a good look, I assure you. But then I tried parting it from the right and what happened? Well, there was an unruly lock that hung down onto my forehead and it reminded me just a little bit of that little lock of hair that Superman in the comics has hanging down in front there. Well, that clinched it. Ever after I have parted my hair on the right side. But did that change who I was on the inside?

So, when we talk about transfiguration, are we just talking about a surface change? Well, so far my evaluation of the word is based merely on a preliminary glance. Thinking about this passage I decided that deeper investigation was warranted. You will have to forgive me, I decided to dive into the original Greek.

Actually, the Greek word that was translated into transfiguration, itself might be familiar to you. Mark used the word, μεταμορφώθη (*metamorphothe*). Of course we have a very similar word in English that is used when caterpillars change into butterflies, *metamorphosis*. My ancient Greek lexicon tells us this word means “of a transformation that is outwardly visible.”¹

I think this interesting because it is telling us that the transfiguration may be on the inside of whatever is being transformed, but all that we know about it has only to do with the surface appearance. Mark tells us of Jesus in verse 3 that, “His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them.” This is a very cursory description for something we Christians make such a big deal about. But Mark is generally very sparse in his descriptions. I think the

1 Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1971) 513.

implication is that Jesus seemed to glow, and we get the feeling that this was not just the clothes that Jesus wore. In fact, the story of the Transfiguration in Luke does go deeper and says that even “the appearance of his face changed.” (Luke 9:29) So what the Apostles saw was an indescribable essence that indicated the divinity of Jesus.

But you will notice something about this change, this transfiguration, of Jesus: the change in Jesus was not in his essence. His appearance changed just for a short time to reveal to the disciples and ultimately to the world the divinity of Jesus Christ. The divinity was always there from the birth, from the founding of the world, from before all time. We believe that when Jesus came to earth, he was fully human and fully divine at the same time. This transfiguration, then, was a revelation of the status of Jesus in the heavenly realm, and this was confirmed by the appearance of Moses and Elijah on the scene.

So as we are viewing what is going on here and we think, well duh, the disciples should have figured this out by now! But how could the disciples have truly known this before the Transfiguration? Sure, Peter had guessed at it in Mark Chapter 8, but Peter was certainly thinking of a temporal king and kingdom as exhibited by the way the disciples would subsequently argue over who would sit at the right hand of Jesus when he came into his power. Besides, they had been living with him, traveling with him, seeing his human side and all that implied on a daily basis. Yes, there were glimpses of divinity, especially in the miracles, but this episode on the mountain was like an exclamation point, a confirmation, a flame lighting the fire of what had been kindling in their hearts.

This points up something important in this scene. It was revelatory, meaning it revealed something to the disciples that they needed to know. And they found it out for certain when a cloud appeared and covered them. The funny thing about clouds in the Bible is that they often are a sign of God's veiled presence. We see it when the Israelites are wandering in the desert for forty years. They are led by a pillar of smoke in the day and a spout of fire by night. We see it also when the Ten Commandments are delivered at Mount Sinai and the voice of God comes out of the cloud like thunder.

But this time the voice is understandable. There are three accounts in the Bible of the Transfiguration. And they appear in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. They are all markedly similar, with only a few minor differences, the most significant one is in what God says from the cloud. In our reading from Mark, God says, "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!" (v.7) In Matthew God tacks on an additional phrase, "...with him I am well pleased..." And in Luke we find that God specifies that this is "...the one whom I have chosen..." But one thing that all of them agree on is that last imperative statement in Mark, "Listen to Him!"

Interesting that in this entire scene the Apostles are just by-standers watching what is happening. But then in this one moment they are given something to do. They are given a command from the highest source, a command to "listen!" And in most of the translations the command is followed by an exclamation point!

I said that the disciples were just by-standers. But is this really so? Were they just an audience for something that

happened up on the mountain? just happening to be in the right place at the right time? Really, I don't think it was any kind of accident that this scene played out the way it did. In reality it was all done for the benefit of the disciples and by extension for us. Jesus already knew who he was. Elijah and Moses were already in heaven. Their appearance was to give the disciples understanding.

We talked earlier about how Jesus was not really transformed, the disciples were only now seeing who he truly was. The transfiguration happened to help the disciples to see, to help them understand just who Jesus was so that they could act in the world on that information. This was to help the disciples to be transformed! We also talked a little about that Greek word, *metamorphethe* which is so reminiscent of that process of a caterpillar becoming a butterfly.

You often hear me talk about how we were made in the image of God. I think this has so many implications in theology, and I think we are running into one of them here. We have a part of Christ, the Spirit within us, and it takes some work to bring that Christ-likeness that we were born with to the surface.

Just how do we do that? Well, if you were listening when God spoke from that cloud up on that mountain as Jesus stood next to Moses and Elijah, you will remember that God gave only one command to the disciples. God was talking to them, and God was talking to us. He said "Listen to him!" Him being Jesus, of course. And this listening isn't like sitting down and listening to music, or a podcast, or an audio-book. No this listening is

active listening. Inculcating what it is that Jesus has to say and letting ourselves be guided by that message.

It is quite fascinating how the message in all of the Gospels is always so full of the “Word”, to the point that in the Gospel of John we find out that Jesus IS the Word. And here is the clincher. This is where being made in the image of Christ, being born in the Spirit of Jesus comes in ... when we do as God commands, “Listening to Him”, we will be transformed, first from within. Our thoughts and our desires through study, through prayer, through discipleship begin to come into line with the Word that we read. When our thoughts are on the Word soon our words are reformed, transformed, transfigured. And when our words change from confrontation and hate to love, and hope, then our actions will accord with that image of Christ that is within us that is illustrated for us in the Gospels. Through Christ our lives become changed, and we are transformed.

It is only when Christ has transformed us that we, like Christ, can be transfigured. What was it that happened to Christ on that mountain? The inner person, the reality of his being was revealed, showing his inner light and his true relationship with God. For our inner light to shine forth, for our true relationship with God to be revealed we first have to have an inner light. It is kind of like that caterpillar turning into a butterfly that we talked about earlier. Most of its life it is a caterpillar, but then it builds a cocoon around itself, and it is transformed within. It is already a butterfly even within the cocoon, but it must actively work to be fully transfigured into the butterfly.

And with this transfiguration of our outer being confirming the transformation of our inner being we find that there is a reinforcing effect. It is kind of like when I flopped my hair from one side of my head to the other. It did not turn me into Superman, but having that Superman curl made me feel a little more capable, a little less vulnerable maybe made me just a little more confident. So taking on the outside form of being a Christian, reinforces what is going on inside you through Christ, making of yourself a whole Christian within and without.

To be a Christian is to be like Christ. The transfiguration of Jesus was a message, an example to the disciples and to the world. Work toward your own transformation and transfiguration and be your own little beacon to your own little world.

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