

## **The Transfiguration**

I enjoy the story of the Pastor who was enamored of the religious artwork of a religious Sister. After being inspired with several Biblical scenes which the Sister had painted, the Pastor asked the Sister: “Would you paint for me a depiction of the Transfiguration of Jesus?” The Sister replied regretfully: “No.” She explained that she did not feel ready spiritually to depict in art such a glorified scene in the life of Christ.

The scene of the Transfiguration in the Gospel of Luke does present us with a challenging spiritual depiction. One obvious connection that we could make is to think of the scene like one of those moments when a light breaks through our consciousness and things become more translucent than normal. The scene affirms something that we believe in our Christian faith: that God’s love breaks through often at unexpected moments. A prayer puts this into words when it says: “O God you are waiting to surprise us.” These are the moments when God’s grace brings insight and renewal to our hearts.

When we look at the Biblical account of the Transfiguration, we are struck first by the picture of Jesus ascending a mountain. The mountain in the Bible is often the meeting place between God and His people. Jesus goes up the mountain to pray. Before every important moment in His ministry, Jesus prays. He prays before he selects His disciples; He prays before His crucifixion; and He prays before His Transfiguration. Something momentous is about to happen.

The scene contains echoes from the life of Moses. Jesus is accompanied on the mountain by three of His disciples. So also, was Moses accompanied by three of his colleagues ascending a mountain. The Hebrew Scriptures record Moses’ face shining when he met God. Jesus’ face is described as changed. The connection with Moses is strengthened when Moses appears with Jesus in this scene. Moses appearing together with Elijah, representing the Law and the prophets, suggests that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law and the prophets. Moses and Elijah play the role of two witnesses just as there are two witnesses, the two angels, at the empty tomb announcing, “He is risen”. The Transfiguration becomes the foreshadowing

of the Resurrection. Moses and Elijah speak of the exodus that Jesus was going to accomplish in Jerusalem. The exodus harks back to the liberation of the Jewish people from the hands of the Egyptians, which event our Jewish brothers and sisters commemorate in the Passover celebration. For us who are Christians, the new exodus is the liberation which Jesus accomplishes through His death and Resurrection on the cross, His passing-over from death to new life.

When we turn our gaze to the three disciples of Jesus who accompany Jesus (Peter, James and John), we notice that they are the same three disciples who were first called by Christ and the same three who were with him in the Garden of Gethsemane. As in Gethsemane, so here, they are described as ‘overcome by sleep’ - a sign that they are in a state of spiritual inattention. But they finally awake and recognize that they are experiencing a breakthrough experience – an awareness that the light of God’s grace is becoming apparent. They want to hold onto to this enlightened moment. They want to build three tents. But this moment is not a moment which they can control.

This is God’s moment, and the Scriptures say: “a cloud came over them. We remember what the angel said to Mary at the Annunciation when Mary said, “How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?”. The angel said: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.” The disciples are likewise overshadowed and hear the voice of God which says: “This is my Beloved Son. Listen to Him.”

We know from the Scriptures that the disciples had trouble many times understanding Jesus’ teaching. Here they are being invited to listen – to pray for understanding and wisdom. That is the takeaway for us who examine the scene of the Transfiguration and ponder its meaning. We are invited to listen to Jesus, to enter, as it were, into Jesus’ prayer with His Heavenly Father.

Pope Benedict XVI in his writings before he was elected Pope spoke of prayer as being “the central act of the person of Jesus.” He wrote that “participation in the mind of Jesus (in His prayer) is a basic precondition if real understanding is to take place...The person who prays begins to see”. (The Gospel of Luke by Pedro T. Gadenz, Baker Academic:2018, page 188)

When we ask ourselves, “What happened at the Transfiguration?”, we are invited to contemplate what it means to pray with Jesus by listening to Him. The Gospel tells us that “Peter and his companions had been overcome by sleep, but becoming fully awake, they saw his glory”. They went from a state of spiritual lethargy to a state of spiritual insight.

One commentator puts it this way: “He (Jesus) took the blinders off their eyes to see Him as He really was. There is a similar story from the Old Testament about the prophet Elisha. The king of Syria sent an army of horses and chariots to capture and kill Elisha and they surrounded the town of Dothan where Elisha was. ‘Alas!’ (the servant) said to Elisha. ‘What shall we do, my lord?’ Elisha answered, ‘Do not be afraid. Our side outnumbered theirs.’ Then he prayed, ‘O Lord, open his eyes that he may see.’ And the Lord opened the eyes of the servant, and he saw that the mountainside was filled with fiery chariots and horses around Elisha. (2 Kings 6:15-17)”. (from *Food for the Soul* by Peter Kreeft, Word on Fire:2021, page 180)

We affirm that God opens our eyes to see Christ truly present in the Eucharist. We are also invited to see Christ in our neighbor. The poet reminds us that “Christ also plays in ten thousand places, lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his to the Father through the features of men’s faces.” (Inversnaid by Gerard Manley Hopkins).

Our prayer, inspired by the Transfiguration, might be: “Almighty God, You enabled your disciples to see the transfigured Christ on the mountainside. Awaken within us the gifts of wisdom and understanding so that we may see with the eyes of faith and live as a people who give glory to Your name. We pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.”