

## Transfiguration + 6 August + Dan 7 + 2 Pet 1 + Mt 17:1-9

The Transfiguration of our Lord that we heard recounted in our Gospel today is probably one of the most beautiful, and mysterious events in Scripture. So much so, that we might wonder *why*? What was the point of this incredible event? Well, there are 2 main reasons for the Transfiguration: to reveal Jesus' identity, and to prepare the disciples for the coming Cross. So let's look at both of these, and then see what they might mean for us today.

To begin, the first aspect of Jesus' identity that the Transfiguration reveals is His Divinity. Just before this episode in Matthew's Gospel, the Pharisees and Sadducees come to Jesus and demand that He perform a sign, so that they can figure out who He really is. So later on, Jesus asks his disciples, *Who do people say that the Son of Man is?* They reply, *Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.* So obviously there is considerable debate and confusion among the people about who He really is. So then He asks them, *But who do you say that I am?* And Peter replies, *You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.* Peter has answered correctly. And even more to His credit, He answers by faith. Unlike the Pharisees and Sadducees, he doesn't need proof to believe.

So now Jesus takes Peter, along with James and John, and rewards their faith with a definitive revelation, and unmistakable sign, of Who He really is. Literally, this word "*transfigure*" in Greek means "*to go beyond the form.*" Here, for a brief, shining moment, the hidden reality of the glory of God radiating from His Son is made evident in Jesus' body. On this mountain, Jesus reveals that He truly is *God from God* and *light from light*, as we profess each Sunday in the Creed. As if to remove any further confusion, the Father then confirms the vision: *This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.* In the Old Testament, Moses too ascended a mountain in order to receive the Word from God. When he came down the mountain, Moses' face shone, *because he had been talking with God* (cf. Ex 34). And the divine light scared the people so much they couldn't bear to look at him, even though Moses was only like the moon, reflecting the light of God. But Jesus' light shines from within, for He is the true Son. So it's no wonder the disciples too were afraid!

The second aspect of the revelation of Jesus' identity on the Mountain is that He is the fulfillment of the Word God spoke to the People as recorded in the Old Testament Scriptures: the Law and the Prophets. In this scene, Moses represents the Law—the gift that God gave the Israelites on Mount Sinai, teaching the People how they were to live in right relationship with the one true God, so as to be a light to the nations. Elijah represents the Prophets—those mysterious men and women of old who spoke the word of God to the People, in order to turn the hearts of the people back to God. Both Moses and Elijah received the Word of God on a mountain. But Jesus doesn't receive God's Word, rather He *is* the Word. Which is why the Father says to the disciples, *listen to him!*

With the coming of Jesus Christ, all that the Law demanded, and all the Prophets proclaimed, was fulfilled. Jesus not only teaches us how to be in right relationship with God, but He Himself is the means through which we can live in right relationship with God. And as if to remove all doubt, the Divine voice comes from the cloud that cast a shadow over them on the mountain. This cloud hearkens to the cloud that would overshadow the Tent of Meeting in the Old Testament, whenever Moses would converse with God. For pious Jews such as Peter and James and John, the sign would be unmistakable: truly the glory of God is there, in their midst, shining through the Son.

Finally, the Transfiguration was an event meant to strengthen Peter, James, and John for the shadow and scandal of the Cross that they were soon to witness. Again, just before this episode, after Peter makes his profession of faith, Jesus reveals the shocking news that He would *suffer greatly...be killed and on the third day be raised*. So the vision of the glory of God shining through Christ was given to the disciples to remember, when it seemed as if all was lost when He died on the Cross. Unfortunately, it seems that for Peter and James, this vision was not enough. Scripture records that John was the only one of the 12 disciples who remained with Jesus at the cross. The others were nowhere to be found when Jesus ascends another mountain, Mt. Calvary, flanked not by Moses and Elijah, but by two thieves.

So what can we take away from this Gospel? First, that Jesus has His own unique identity; meaning, we do not make Him up in our own image and likeness. This is a huge problem today: people make Jesus out to be whoever they want Him to be, often for their own personal agendas. But that is an act of violence; Jesus was a real divine person. And if we want to truly be His disciples, we have to allow Him to reveal Himself to us, even if He sometimes makes us confused or uncomfortable. After all, He is God and we are not, so there is no other way. If we try to make Him up, we only create our own idol. Even more, Jesus is concretely tied to this world, to human history, to the People of Israel, and to us, His Church. He is not a vague spirituality, or a metaphor for self-transcendence. He is real, living, human, and divine. Which is why we must be people who embrace both the Old and New Testaments, as well as the living Tradition of the Church. Why following Him is a matter of the soul and body, word and sacrament, faith and good deeds.

Next, the Transfiguration should strengthen us to not give up faith in the face of the Cross. This too, sadly, happens all the time: the Cross comes, and people give up on Christ. Like Peter, we want to live always on spiritual highs, on “mountaintop” experiences, but this isn’t possible on earth. We’re not there yet. We still walk the way of the Cross. And as heavy and as hard as that way seems at times, it is only for a time. The final, eternal mountaintop of heaven awaits us, if we don’t give up, if we don’t lose faith. On that mountain we will bask in the glory of the Lord, a glory that will never fade, a glory that He will share with all of us. And with Peter, we will exclaim, *Lord, it is good that we are here!*