



The Feast of the Transfiguration of Our Lord



Date: Sunday, August 6, 2017 | **Season:** Ordinary Time after Easter | **Year:** A

First Reading: Daniel 7:9–10, 13–14

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 97:1–2, 5–6, 9 | **Response:** Psalm 97:1a, 9a

Second Reading: 2 Peter 1:16–19

Gospel Acclamation: Matthew 17:5c

Gospel Reading: Matthew 17:1–9

Preached at: the Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Braamfontein in the Archdiocese of Johannesburg, South Africa.

I have three small thoughts about today's readings and they concern Revelation, dialogue and prayer.

Today we celebrate an important Feast – the Feast of the Transfiguration, a Feast that is mentioned in all three of the synoptic Gospels, and which symbolically links the beginning of Jesus' ministry, his Baptism, with the end of his ministry, on the Cross.

In our first reading from the Prophet Daniel we read of a vision of one who is like the Son of Man. This was believed to foretell the Messiah, who we know as Jesus, and whom Jesus' disciples acknowledged as such. It is In the Transfiguration that they were given proof or confirmation of this belief.

This event in Jesus' life comes at a point at which, after telling parables and healing people, and telling the crowd not to say anything, Jesus takes his close disciples up a mountain – to a private place, close to the heavens – and God reveals Jesus' divinity to his disciples. In this revelation, the Disciples are now more certain that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of Man.

In fact it is true to say that the Disciples in today's Gospel experience nothing short of a theophany or revelation of the Most Holy Trinity. In what is described in today's Gospel, it is as if heaven is opened, and the Father points to the beloved Son making Him radiant and from the cloud which represents the Spirit, a voice is heard from the Father who tells them to listen, to listen to His beloved Son in whom he is well pleased. I think this scene recalls his Baptism, where the

Holy Spirit descended upon him and God said from the cloud ‘ This is my beloved Son.’ But now God the Father adds the injunction: ‘Listen to Him’. This is the heart of the matter. We must listen to Jesus.

So the Gospel is all about Jesus’ divinity being revealed on the Mountain top. There have of course been other interesting things that have happened on mountain-tops throughout the bible, but usually the person on the mountain-top receives a revelation from God. For example, Moses received the law from God on the top of Mount Sinai, whilst Elijah asked to see God’s face and was not shown it, he did find God, though not in a storm or an earthquake or a fire, but in the whisper of a gentle breeze. But the Transfiguration is different. Jesus took Peter, James and John up the mountain and he is transfigured – Jesus does not receive a revelation, but rather Jesus himself is revealed to be God, the Son of Man, the Messiah.

Whereas both Moses and Elijah during their life asked to see the face of God, this was not always granted. At the transfiguration, however, they now see him face-to-face in Jesus. They not only see God in Jesus, but, and this is important, they are able to converse with Jesus. This is my second point, the importance of dialogue.

The transfiguration is represented by Jesus becoming radiant. Moses and Elijah, dead for many years, suddenly appear and, significantly, they are able to talk with Jesus. Moses represents the Law, whilst Elijah represents the Prophets. Jesus is the Messiah, fulfilling both the prophecy and the law. He is the son of man prophesied in the first reading that we heard from Daniel, to whom God the Father gives dominion and an ever-lasting Kingdom.

Unlike at the Baptism where Jesus is tempted on a mountain top, here Jesus is revealed to be the true Messiah, the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. In a way, this offers courage and strength to the disciples who have been told by Jesus that the Messiah must suffer. As Peter says in the Second Reading, he was an eyewitness to God’s majesty, and that “we heard this voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. And we have the prophetic word made more sure.”

We know that this suffering will take place on Calvary – another mountain, or at least a hill top.

I would like to suggest that as we contemplate the transfiguration today, we also contemplate the Cross. Because the knowledge of Jesus' transfiguration, the confirmation from God that Jesus is the Son of the Father, serves as strength and encouragement for the disciples during Jesus' passion and death. In fact, just before the Transfiguration in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus told his disciples that if anyone would follow him, they must deny themselves and take up their cross, and at the end of the Gospel Jesus says to tells his disciples not to talk about it 'until the Son of man is raised from the dead.' So Allow me to draw some parallels between the two episodes:

Today Jesus is revealed in glory at the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor, but later on Calvary, Jesus will be revealed in shame. At the Transfiguration his clothes are shining white, but on the cross his clothes have been stripped from him and gambled away. At the Transfiguration he is flanked on either side by Moses and Elijah, heroes of Israel, but on the Cross he will be flanked by two criminals, detested by Israel. At the Transfiguration we are told there is a bright cloud, but as Jesus died on the Cross we know that darkness covers the earth. At the Transfiguration Peter says "Lord, it is well that you are here" but we know he later denies even knowing Jesus and hides himself from him. At the Transfiguration God himself declares that Jesus is His beloved son, but at the Cross it is a pagan centurion who declares, in surprise, that this really was God's Son. The parallels here are worth, I believe, holding together in tension. How beautiful and powerful the Transfiguration scene is to see a glimpse of God revealed in Jesus. But equally important is how Jesus is revealed as God for all when he rises from the dead.

Now of course, the Transfiguration describes the power, love and beauty of God. And we can imagine how awesome it must have been for Peter and the others, to see Jesus casually chatting with the revered Fathers of the Judaic Faith, his whole body radiant with power and divinity. But the reason Jesus shared this transfiguration with his disciples was so that we, who follow in the footsteps of the disciples, might see the power, love and beauty of God in Jesus. We should not just recognize it in Jesus, but we must listen to him, as the Father commanded.

In the example of the disciples, this listening is not just one-way, but there is a dialogue. Peter, James and John, see Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus. An Ignatian contemplation of this scene might well imagine what they were speak-

ing about. When we pray, we must see prayer as a dialogue with God, with the God revealed to be Jesus Christ.

The take-away for today is that we should listen to Jesus, who is God, but a God who wants to listen and converse with us.

Let us pray today that we might listen to Jesus, the Son of God in our lives. Let us pray that we might converse with Him, like Moses and Elijah, and talk to God as one friend to another. Amen.

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