

## Last Epiphany C – The Transfiguration of Christ

General Douglas MacArthur recounted a particularly difficult moment while he was a cadet at West Point. He wrote, “The first section was studying the time-space relationship later formulated by Einstein as his Theory of Relativity. The text was complex and, being unable to comprehend it, I committed the pages to memory. When I was called upon to recite, I solemnly reeled off almost word for word what the book said. Our instructor, Colonel Fieberger, looked at me somewhat quizzically and asked, "Do you understand this theory?"

It was a bad moment for me, but I did not hesitate in replying, "No, sir." You could have heard a pin drop. I braced myself and waited.

And then the slow words of the professor: "Neither do I, Mr. MacArthur. Section dismissed."

It is a common perception of those who read the Gospels that Jesus’ contemporaries were crystal clear about who he was and what he was up to. The assumption is something like: he came upon the scene armed with a resume, business cards, and letterhead. He called 12 talented, spiritually sensitive men, who had been anxiously awaiting his arrival, and they immediately got on with the business plan that

he had developed in the eons that preceded his birth in Bethlehem. The business that he planned for himself and his disciples was to go around teaching people how to be nice to one another and love everybody. His enemies were the Jews and the Romans, and they knew who he was too. They didn't like his plan and so they killed him.

The problem with this perception is that upon a cursory reading of the Gospel texts themselves it is shown to be evidently false. Instead, most of Jesus' contemporaries had no idea who he was or what he was up to. The disciples were not exceptions to the rule. Instead, they were very much like cadet MacArthur, presented with information they could do nothing with. The Gospels, like this waning season of Epiphany, assume darkness rather than light. They suppose ignorance rather than perception. But the time had come and the light has shined into the dark world!

So to our text this morning, what are we to make of this mighty revelation, this Transfiguration of Christ? Luke has been leading us here, and we should not be surprised now that we have arrived! Jesus had raised the daughter of the ruler of the synagogue from the dead. Then he sent out the 12 disciples with power over the demons and to

cure disease. Jesus had just miraculously fed the 5,000 men along with their wives and children from five loaves of bread and a few small fish. Once they were finished the disciples collected twelve baskets of leftovers. After this miracle he asked the disciples who they thought he was. And Peter gives his halting confession, “You are the Christ.” Then Jesus predicted, for the first time, his impending suffering and death at the hands of his enemies. Jesus called the crowds to him and told them that, “if any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me”. Then Our Lord Jesus took three of his disciples, Peter, James and John to the mountain and was transfigured before them. What has Luke done? In this quick succession of events he has shown Jesus Christ raising the dead, feeding the people of God in the wilderness and driving out the armies of Satan. He was the new Adam. The first Adam had fallen from the Garden and had given into the temptations of the serpent and the voice of his wife. He had been driven out and had been cursed to die at hard labor. The new Adam, even Jesus the Messiah, raises the dead and gives his life so that all might live. In feeding the people in the wilderness he showed that he was a prophet as great as Moses,

the father of the Israelite nation. By subduing the demons, he showed that he was the true king who had returned to take back his kingdom.

So, then, Jesus went up the mountain with Peter, James and John to be alone. And he was transfigured before them. They experienced Jesus' literal "metamorphosis": his form, his appearance was change before their very eyes. What had once been a threadbare, road weary carpenter from Nazareth, now had begun shining brighter than the sun itself. These three fishermen had witnessed his greatest miracles: the healings, the feedings, and even raising people from the dead. These had drawn a confession from Peter that Jesus was the Messiah. But now, all uncertainty was wiped away, for here before them Jesus shone brighter than all the heavenly host.

With Jesus appeared the two saints Moses and Elijah, and they stood next to him and spoke with him. In the presence of the three witnesses, the Galilean disciples, all salvation history was brought together. For here is Moses who received the Law from Yahweh himself on the top of another mountain: Mount Sinai. He received the written covenant, the record of God's perfection and holiness. Moses

had looked upon the face of God and had not died. He had instructed the children of Israel in the precepts of the Lord so that they might be pleasing to him and receive his blessings.

But they had not obeyed the covenant, and had broken the commandments, and so the Lord had sent the prophets to call the people back into obedience to the Lord. Even as the prophet Jeremiah wrote, “Behold, the days are coming says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the House of Israel and the house of Judah: I will put my law within them and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” So Elijah, the prince of the prophets, appears in conversation with the Lord Jesus. Elijah had been very zealous for the Lord. He had suffered persecution at the hands of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel and her pagan priests. All of Elijah’s fellow prophets had been executed, yet he remained steadfast. So he traveled 40 days and nights in the power of the Lord to another mountain: Mount Horeb. And there he laid his fears before the Lord. And the Lord appeared to him and comforted him.

So, here on the mountain, stand Moses and Elijah, saints of the old covenant waiting upon the Lord Christ, the great prophet promised by Moses himself, shining in glory. For the writer of Hebrews says, “In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power.” Moses and Elijah, the Law and the Prophets, were most holy and blessed servants of the Most High God. They spoke the words of truth as they pointed the children of Israel to a time when something greater would appear. They were messengers; they were apostles. They spoke the word, but they were not the Word. For St. Paul writes to the Colossians, “He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. For in him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell.” They were forerunners, but the Lord himself had come and now they gave way before him. The

Law and the Prophets were fulfilled in Christ and so Moses and Elijah pale and fade away, leaving Jesus standing alone with his disciples.

Therefore, since Jesus the Messiah was transfigured on the mount that we might see that he is the fulfillment of all God's revelation to the world, let us see how he is the hope for everlasting salvation. The disciples were, understandably, terrified in the presence of this heavenly company. Not knowing what else to say, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is well that we are here; let us make three booths." Now we may excuse Peter for saying this, but we may wonder what appeal lean-to shacks on the top of a mountain might have for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. For they had come from the glories of Heaven, the mansions and streets made of gold and precious jewels. What glories may compare to the heavenly country? Yet Peter offers what best he can to make them stay a bit longer in this place.

Yet how often we find ourselves, not blinded by heavenly brilliance, but tempted by the mundane baubles of this world. How easy it is for us to say to the Lord in our prayers, "Master, it is well that I am here; let me make a more comfortable place here." How great is our need

for a shaft of heavenly light to reveal the truth of this world – it is passing away. Instead, we so often join with those who do not know Jesus in acting like this world is the only one that counts. We are like the people of Noah’s day who reveled and married and wasted as though the storm would never come. All the while, Noah built, and Noah preached, and Noah prayed. So we too, live our lives on this earth, either in greed or in laziness, forgetting that booths here will rot and fall, but the mansions in heaven last for eternity.

So, we too must hear the voice from heaven that came to the disciples, “This is my beloved Son; listen to him.” Jesus Christ is the only way to the Father, for he is the one whom the Father loves. If you would go to the Father, it can only be by following Jesus Christ. And where did Jesus go? Did he remain on the mountain with his three disciples, wishing they could remain there always? How sadly disappointing it would have been if the only Son of God had gone through the trouble to be conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary; grown to maturity while suffering the hardships of the common human experience; only to commune for all eternity on the top of a mountain with three friends. What joy? What victory? None there, but disappointment.

But Jesus did not remain, but marched down the mountainside, gathered the rest of his disciples and within the month was crucified on another mountain: Mount Calvary. And here, dear friends, is the source of hope and joy for all mankind. The mount of Transfiguration leads to Mount Calvary! The manifest glory of Jesus Christ was brilliant as he was transfigured. He shined brighter than any star. Yet he was more glorious as he hung upon the tree. Remember the words of that great hymn by Charles Wesley,

The dear tokens of His passion  
Still His dazzling body bears;  
Cause of endless exultation  
To His ransomed worshippers;  
With what rapture, with what rapture, with what rapture  
Gaze we on those glorious scars!

What could be more glorious than the transfigured Christ? There is but one thing: the crucified and ascended Christ who bears upon his body the guarantees of our redemption, our release from sin through faith in his blood. The Son of God was incarnate to be manifest among us, that we might behold him, love him and follow him. For he

shone in glory on the mountain. He died in agony upon the cross. He rose in victory from the grave. He ascended triumphantly to his Father.

We too must follow him, if we would be his disciples. We must be transformed through faith in him. Our lives must shine forth so that the world may be brought into obedience to the Father and his Son Jesus Christ. For Jesus exhorted his disciples, “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your father who is in Heaven.”

We too must follow him, for he is not only our teacher, and our savior, but he is himself our eternal inheritance. How glorious must Heaven be, my friends, if this transfigured and ascended Christ is there? How joyful must Heaven be with Christ, not surrounded by three dirty fishermen, but by tens of thousands of saints, apostles, prophets and angels praising his name? Let us go there together, for we cannot remain here. Let us be transfigured on the last day, receiving the gift of eternal life in bodies that shall never grow old. Let us follow him, and be with him eternally. AMEN.

