

The Gospel of the Transfiguration.

OUR own Anglican Church has no special festival for the Transfiguration, though a special day (August 6) is set apart for it in our Prayer-Book. But the American Church, realizing its importance in relation to our Lord's Person and ministry, and in its message to the Church, has returned to the earlier custom of Christendom, from the eighth century onwards, and restored the festival, providing for it a special Collect, Epistle, and Gospel. The Epistle is from 2 Pet. i. The Gospel is St. Luke's account of the event (ix. 27-36). The Collect, partly built up from the ancient Collect in the Sarum use, runs thus :

"O God, who in the Mount didst reveal to chosen witnesses Thine only-begotten Son, wonderfully transfigured, in raiment white and glistening ; mercifully grant that we, being delivered from the disquietude of this world, may be permitted to behold the King in His beauty, who, with Thee, O Father, and Thee, O Holy Ghost, liveth and reigneth One God, world without end."

The Transfiguration is thus associated with two facts of spiritual experience—the present vision of God, which is the reward of hearts "delivered from the disquietude of this world" ; and the future transfiguring vision, which is hereafter to be the blissful portion of the "children of the resurrection." These two—the subjective experience and the objective revelation—are its two vital aspects.

The supreme importance of the Transfiguration is beginning once again to dawn with all the light of a new revelation upon the modern Church. The number of articles upon it in recent theological magazines bear witness to an awakened interest. It is realized at last that a fact so vitally bound up with the revelation of the Lord's person must, for that reason alone, have an immense significance for His Church. As one important step in the process of His self-manifestation, having its strong link of association with the Baptism, the Confession at Cæsarea Philippi, the Saving Death, the Resurrection and

Glorified Being of our Lord, it can occupy no merely secondary place in His self-revelation. This first sense of its supreme importance is deepened when we study it more in detail. The note of time—just after the Great Confession, just before the descent into the Valley of Humiliation (to quote Edersheim's vivid phrase)—gives it increased significance. Sanday calls it "an outward Divine sanction of the Apostolic Confession."¹ Its intimate association in thought with the Passion at once arrests attention. Wherein lies this close and necessary connection between the suffering and the glory? "The Transfiguration," it has been said,² "is the prelude to the Passion and the Resurrection as surely as the Baptism is the prelude of the ministry." The link with the Resurrection, again, found in our Lord's words spoken as the little group descended the holy mount, is striking and suggestive. The more closely we study it, the more clearly we see that it is the foreshadowing, for a certain definite purpose, of what our Lord's risen glory would be. How intimately that was to be associated with the first genesis of faith in their risen Lord is shown by the effect on St. Peter and St. John of the scene at the empty tomb on the Easter dawn.³ He "understood" (εἶδε) and "believed." Again, the anticipation which it contains of the bodily glory of the saints hereafter is obvious, and, from St. Anselm onwards (see his Sermon on the Transfiguration), this has been generally recognized. "In the Resurrection the spiritual body shall in some sort correspond with the Lord's transfigured body, clothed upon that it may be swallowed up in life."⁴ Its direct relationship to the Coming of the Kingdom, marked by all three Synoptists in their opening words, sheds invaluable light upon what that Kingdom really is, and where and how we are to expect its manifestations.

¹ Hastings' "Dictionary of the Bible," ii. 629.

² *Expository Times*, vol. xvii., pp. 372-375, "The Teaching of the Transfiguration," by W. C. Braithwaite.

³ See Latham's "Risen Master," chap. i.

⁴ *Expository Times*, vol. xiv., p. 442 *et seq.*, "The Transfiguration," by Rev. A. E. Burn, B.D.

Apart from these considerations, the richness and spiritual beauty of the lessons which underlie its every detail—the isolation with Christ, which is the secret of fuller revelations; the spiritual transfiguration, which is the outcome of communion and prayer; the witness which Law and Prophecy alike bear to Jesus; the new light His approaching Cross sheds upon death; the outshining of the glory which all the while was latent within; the voice of Divine attestation which crowns and rewards obedient sonship; the solitary and abiding supremacy of “Jesus only” with ourselves—all these are a precious part of the message which it brings home. And not least in importance is the closing lesson of all, suggested by the contrast which Raffaele’s great picture in the Vatican so vividly portrays—that power to cast out devils which can only come through the power of the vision of faith: “‘If thou canst believe!’ All things are possible to him that believeth.” The Transfiguration is best considered under several successive aspects—As it concerned our Lord Himself; as it affected His first disciples; as it concerns us and our future.

I. *As it concerned our Lord Himself.*—“He was transfigured before them.” The Greek word is *μετεμορφώθη*. He had taken on Him *μορφή δούλου*. Here “the form of God” (Phil. ii. 6) shone through “the form of a servant,” overcoming all obstacles. The “majesty” (*μεγαλειότης*) of God, which astonished them at the foot of the mount in the healing of the demoniac (Luke ix. 43, R.V.), here burst through its veils and transfused the whole person of Christ (2 Pet. i. 16).

(a) Such a Transfiguration was, in the first instance, a *natural climax*. It would, indeed, have been unnatural in the higher sense if the inward movements of His mind at that moment had found no correspondence in some bodily expression. Many of those who have given the most beautiful interpretations of the event—Professor Davidson, Didon, Ederheim, Dr. Campbell Morgan, Mr. A. E. Burn, Mr. Martin—have dwelt with evident delight upon this. “The transfiguration of Jesus was the consummation of all His human life, the

natural issue of all that had preceded it. . . . The life of Jesus was bound to reach this point of transfiguration. It could do no other."¹ "The Transfiguration," he adds, "was no mere accident in the life of Jesus; it was the direct result of its laws of development. The Mount of Transfiguration was the consummation of the life of Jesus." But for His redeeming work He might have passed back with Moses and Elias to the heights of the glory of God. It was "the crowning of the first part of His mission—that of realizing perfect life." It came as "the crowning of His humanity, and therefore as His preparation for the death by which mankind is redeemed."² "It was," writes Mr. Burn, "the very climax of our Lord's ministry."³ "In relation to His Person," another writer declares, "it denotes (a) a sublime self-discovery and (b) a supreme self-dedication. There had been in Himself a growing self-consciousness, and in His disciples a growing perception of the mystery of His life."⁴ As His self grew day by day, He was conscious of a secretly luminous life, known only to Himself, only glimpses of which He could bring within the ken of His disciples. It was necessary that He should be lucid, first of all, to Himself. In the hour of self-abandonment and trust, in full view of His approaching Passion, that self-revelation came. "He received in return that wonderful and beautiful inflow of life which stirred up unfathomable springs of purity within, and transmuted even His face and form. It was as when in the sunlight, peering into the heart of a gem, we see depth opening beyond depth, until it looks as if there were no end to the chambers of splendour that are shut up in the little stone; flake after flake of luminous colour floating up out of the unseen fountain which lies somewhere in its heart. In that high hour Jesus knew Himself. He likewise learnt His task. . . . The sweet and awful gladness of His consecration fills His heart and shines

¹ Dr. Campbell Morgan, "The Crises of the Christ," chap. xvi., p. 198.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 198-203.

³ Rev. A. E. Burn in *Expository Times*, vol. xiv., p. 442.

⁴ Hastings' "Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels": article "Transfiguration," vol. ii., pp. 742-745.

out in His face. The Transfiguration was the Divine defiance of the coming darkness."¹

Professor Davidson writes to the same effect. He was transfigured, he writes, by what was going on within Him. It all came from within. It was but the reflection of the movements in His own mind and heart at the moment, finding their centre in His death. It was joy out of sorrow. "There is often a deeper joy in sorrow—the feeling, as it were, of a new birth and a new consecration, and of a refining and quickening of all that is highest in us, and an enlarging of the meaning of all things and of human life, that causes the face to shine with a subdued but heavenly light."² The Transfiguration is thus "the reward of sinlessness."³ It is the natural climax, in contrast to the redemptive climax, of His ministry. It is the necessary glorification of Jesus, in which we behold Him who was made "a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death" (Heb. ii. 9), "crowned with glory and honour."

(b) It was thus, as has been already said, *an illumination from within*. It was the outshining of a glory which belonged to His inner being at that moment, and must necessarily find expression. "The fulness of the Spirit which was in Christ cast its splendour over His whole being; yea, the heavenly luminosity of His inner man, which else was still bound by the obscurity of His earthly appearing, now broke forth, and poured even upon His apparel a white and glistening light which was wholly new to the astonished disciples."⁴ "It is manifest," writes Professor Davidson, "that this glory was no reflected light. It was not a splendour that fell on Him from without and lighted Him up. The glory came from within. It corresponded to something going on in His mind. . . . The external change was but the reflection of internal movements in His own

¹ Hastings' "Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels": article "Transfiguration," vol. ii., pp. 742-745.

² Professor A. B. Davidson's "The Called of God," sermon on "Transfiguration."

³ *Expository Times*, Rev. A. E. Burn, vol. xiv., p. 442 *et seq.*

⁴ Lange's "Life of Christ," vol. iii., pp. 250-263 (trans.).

mind and heart, going on at the moment."¹ "It was," writes Dr. Campbell Morgan, "inherent glory flashing forth."²

Strauss sees clearly this difference from all other miracles. "It relates," he says, "to a miracle *in* Jesus instead of a miracle performed *by* Jesus. It has the character of an epoch in the life of Jesus which, on the score of resemblance, could only be associated with the Baptism and the Resurrection." Herder, he adds, correctly designated these three events as the three luminous points in the life of Jesus which attest His heavenly mission.

It has even been urged by some that there was nothing unusual or unique in this instance. "It stands out," writes Mr. Mathieson Forson, "as an instance of Christ's normal experience when wrapped in prayer."³ It was there before they awoke; it was there after they awoke. It vanished directly Peter spoke. It was there, not for their sakes, but because it was the inevitable accompaniment of our Lord's rapt spirit of prayer. "For aught we know," he adds, "the Garden of Gethsemane may have been a Garden of Transfiguration." But everything in the narrative represents the occasion as exceptional, and our Lord Himself describes it as a "vision." It is certainly, as Mr. Forson admits, the only illustration the disciples ever got of the glory wrought by prayer on the Person of Christ. And the allusions of our Lord which led up to it prepared the disciples for something very unusual. Yet there are other occasions in His earthly life that prepare us for it. The voice at the Baptism, the walking on the sea, the sense of personal majesty which now and then impressed His disciples (*e.g.*, at Nazareth and Gethsemane), the voice from heaven in John xii., are all instances.

(c) It was, again, *in direct relationship to the contemplation of His death* that the glory came. "It was doubtless on the subject of His death that He held communion with God. From

¹ Professor A. B. Davidson, "Waiting upon God," p. 139.

² Campbell Morgan, "Crises of the Christ," p. 196.

³ *Expository Times*, vol. xvii., p. 140, note.

the intensity of that communion He became outwardly glorious, The radiance of His love for the world, the dignity of suffering, the full realization of His death and its meaning, expressed themselves for a moment externally in His earthly body—a sight more wonderful than the bush that was not consumed.”¹ There is a remarkable passage in Charles Dickens’ “Tale of Two Cities,” in the account of Sydney Carton’s death in the horrors of the Reign of Terror. He had given himself up to die for Darnay because of the love he bore to his wife and child. And, as they dragged him on the tumbrel to the place of execution, he had, says Dickens, “the peacefullest face of all. He gave himself to die for others, and he was transfigured by self-sacrifice.” The attestation of the Father seems directly related to that fact. The Transfiguration “marked the descent into the Valley of Humiliation and Death.”

But if the glory came from within, the attestation came from above. The conjunction of both at such a moment itself creates the impression that the Transfiguration was God’s gift of glory to One who sought it, not along lines of earthly splendour, but through the sacrifice of the Cross, with its shame and darkness. The writer of 2 Peter affirms that “He received of the Father honour and glory” (2 Pet. i. 16, 17). The Transfiguration is, indeed, “the answer of God to the perfection of His life.” “God’s humanity blossomed once in the course of the ages, and that Transfigured Man upon the Holy Mount, flashing in the splendour of a light like the sun, glistening with the glory of a whiteness like that of the snow, and flaming with the magnificent beauty of the lightning which flashes its radiance upon the darkness—that was God’s perfect answer.”²

The use of the word “exodus” is very significant in this connection. “Vocabulum valde grave,” writes Bengel with his usual spiritual insight, “quo continentur passio, crux, mors, resurrectio, ascensio.” So the writer of 2 Peter, recalling the scene in the light of the Resurrection, uses the same word of

¹ *Expository Times*, Professor Davidson, vol. xviii., p. 312.

² Campbell Morgan, “Crises of the Christ,” p. 179.

his own coming death (i. 15), and St. Peter in 1 Pet. ii. 24, a passage which raises no question as to its genuineness, uses a most unusual word, "exactly analogous to the word 'exodus' used in the Lord's conversation."¹ Matheson, in his "Studies of the Portrait of Christ," denies that it was a vision of death at all. Death, he says, was distinctly kept in the background. Moses and Elias were there to carry His thoughts *away* from death. For both of them had been separated from association with death. "Moses was without a sepulchre and Elias without a shroud." Our Lord had to "fulfil" His exodus. Not the death only—the passion, cross, death, resurrection. For death had ceased to be a true "exodus" because of sin. The very purpose of God in the exodus of Jesus was to make death an exodus for all men; He "fulfilled" His exodus at Jerusalem, and thereby led His people across a second Red Sea.

(d) There is a fourth feature which equally belongs to our Lord's Person and to His people's future. The Transfiguration was *the Kingdom of God coming with power*. The words immediately precede all three accounts of it in the Gospels, and must be taken in direct connection with the event which immediately follows. "The Son of Man coming in His Kingdom" (Matt.), and "the Kingdom of God coming with power" (Mark), are a direct foreshadowing of this scene. Deissman shows that the word "parousia" was used in the East to describe a royal or imperial coming in state. "The power and presence of our Lord Jesus Christ" are used in 2 Peter to convey what the Transfiguration really was. It was the anticipation of the Advent of the King. The Kingdom cannot be far off when the King is already present. "The Kingdom of God," He had said, "is among (or within) you." It was a present fact in Himself. The exaltation of the Son is the foreshadowing of the commencement of His reign. It is also the anticipation of "the glory which shall be revealed in us." The glorification and the Kingdom were the final cause of the Cross. So that final cause takes concrete expression just on the eve of the Cross.

¹ *Expository Times*, vol. xviii., pp. 7, 8 (ταῖς ἀμαρτίαις ἀπονεύμενοι).

The Cross must be hemmed in by power, for it is itself the symbol of undying victory. If the Baptism is the prelude of the ministry, the Transfiguration is equally the prelude of the Passion and the Resurrection. It shows "the Kingdom of God coming with power" ere the clouds of the last battlefield overshadow it.

II. *As it affected His First Disciples.*—To this partly belongs what has been said above. It was given them to educate them for the Resurrection. In an article by Dr. Kennedy in the *Journal of Theological Studies* (January, 1903), he gives reasons for this belief. If the Resurrection, he writes, was the great event which lay before them, then in the Resurrection itself the fact of greatest moment would be the identity of the Risen Christ. How could they be witnesses of this if they had no knowledge of His glorified body? The word we translate "transfigured" (*μετεμορφώθη*) reminds us vividly of the hints afforded by the Gospel records regarding His post-Resurrection appearances. It recalls most strikingly the word St. Paul uses (*σύμμορφον*, Phil. iii. 21) for the change in the bodies of believers. The word "glory" itself, used to describe the effect of our Lord's appearance when he was transfigured, was the term used in the Apostolic Age to describe the appearance of the Risen Life, whether of Christ Himself or of His disciples. The silence till the Resurrection points in the same direction.

This view is disputed by the Rev. R. Holmes in the July number of the same journal (1903). Mr. Holmes's theory is that it was intended to prepare the disciples for the Cross, and to assure them of the Crown. The setting of the Transfiguration did the first, and the Transfiguration itself the second. But the reasons he gives are hardly convincing. He quotes the fact that our Lord did not appear first to the Chosen Three, but to Mary Magdalene and the women, and yet they recognized Him. But the answer is that, for some reason, Peter and John believed even *without* seeing Him at all, whilst, on the contrary, the women who saw Him were at first mystified at His strangeness. Latham's argument about the effect upon them of the appear-

ance of the grave-clothes convincingly shows that the Transfiguration was the cause. Thus they *were* assisted by the recollection of the event. Holmes admits that John xxi. seems to favour Kennedy's theory, but declares that St. John recognized Him "by a certain sympathy with Him." Admitting that, yet the words which follow, "None of the disciples durst ask Him, knowing that it was the Lord," seem to demand something else as the ground of the general belief of all in the reality of His risen being.

Others have regarded the preparation of the disciples as a more general one.¹ "In the Transfiguration," says Canon Bright, "He was vouchsafing to the Chosen Three such a visible manifestation as might help them to appreciate and piece together revelations internal and spiritual." It was meant to sustain their faith under the tremendous pressure of the coming trials. We may admit readily that, whilst it was not given to create faith, yet it was intended to strengthen it, but this was by means of its education. To understand Gethsemane, they must be brought to understand what lay beyond it.

III. *As it concerns our own Future.*—When we approach this aspect of the event, we are confronting some of its most vital features. It is as a revelation of futurity, of what man shall be in Christ, of all that our Lord's Resurrection meant and means, not only for Himself but for us, of the glimpses that it gives of what a glorified and spiritual body shall be, that it is so immensely significant and precious. The association of the Transfiguration with the Resurrection emerges at every turn. Not till that was consummated were they to speak of it. That prohibition, it has been well said, is a strong confirmation of the incident as an historic fact. The closing words of the Transfiguration passage in 2 Peter—"Until the day dawn and the daystar arise"—can hardly fail to be an allusion to the Great Resurrection Day. The preparation which the event wrought upon the disciples, as shown in result by the attitude of Peter and John at the empty tomb, has already been referred to.

¹ Bright, "The Law of Faith," p. 249.

One purpose, at least, for which it was given was to prepare us to believe in the actual bodily life—"the body of His glory"—of our future state. Our Lord's Resurrection, it has been well said,¹ was the Transfiguration of our whole being, including our bodily life. We have become so accustomed to place Matter and Spirit in a false antithesis of thought, that the real antithesis between the natural body and the spiritual body escapes us. We begin our process of thought by tacitly assuming, without the smallest warrant in the facts themselves, that all that savours of materiality must for that very reason, in some mysterious way which we fail to define, be opposed to spirit. The Church has never in after-ages quite escaped from the fatal Dualism which in the second century flung the shadow of the Gnostic heresy across Christian thought. It has darkened our sky ever since. The contrasted evils of Asceticism and Antinomianism, which were such a blight upon the early Middle Ages, are directly due to a false attitude towards the material world. The lurking mischief of a Docetism which denied the reality of our Lord's bodily resurrection is amongst us still. Matter is even yet to many Christian minds the clog, the foe, the rival, the antithesis, to spirit. At last we begin to see the dawn, with Sir Oliver Lodge, of a healthier and more natural conception of their relation. It is not one of rivalry, but correspondence. Matter is now the servant, now the tyrant, of spirit, according to the use or misuse to which spirit turns it. Carnality, the impulse or tendency towards corruption and death *impressed upon it* by the *ego*—this, not materiality, is the danger which besets its future. The Incarnation was the consecration of the material to the highest, fullest, most abiding life of the spirit. These two God hath joined together; only sin decrees their separation. The spiritual body is therefore no name for some vanishing entity, hovering on the borderland of spirit, and awaiting restlessly the day of its entire dissolution from material existence. No Docetic view of the future of the body is adequate to explain its real character. It waits for a

¹ Westcott, "Gospel of the Resurrection," pp. 157, 164.

“redemption” which enhances and upraises all its powers and functions, that “liberty of the glory of the sons of God” in which it is to share, and of which it is to be the vehicle and expression. Didon, in his account of the Transfiguration, has a thrilling passage in which he works out this aspect of it in detail. It deserves quotation in full:¹

“The impenetrable wall which divides the terrestrial world from the Divine world was for a moment broken down, and the different conditions of mankind were made apparent. His raiment of the whiteness of snow is the symbol of that which matter will become at the time of its Divine transformation; His shining body foreshadows what we ourselves shall one day be; His soul, which embraces the infinite, reveals the destiny of all these spirits which are called to the true life of God. The bright cloud which envelops everything represents the Ineffable Being who will gather to Him all the chosen ones, when they will possess for ever the joy and glory of the Son of God. . . . This is Christ as we behold Him in the majesty of His Kingdom. . . . The divinity within Him . . . for a moment shone through the veiling flesh, tore from it all obscurity, weakness, suffering, and mortality, to clothe it again with light and glory. . . . When the soul of man is bathed in the glory of God; when the soul pervaded by God envelopes the body which it quickens with its own beauty; when Matter, pervaded by the Spirit throughout all its kingdom, suffers a glorious transformation which renders it a worthy habitation for the sons of God, glorified in the image of Jesus, then the Kingdom of Heaven shall be consummated. . . . God appeared in Jesus at His Transfiguration as He will in us at the end of time. . . . Jesus wished to show thus to all mankind the glorious goal which He should reach through death. . . . Sorrow and death are but the way; the end, for Him as for us, is the transfiguration of our whole being into the splendour of God.”

This view is shared by most thinkers now. “Sometimes (*i.e.*, in the Transfiguration) we catch a glimpse of a Form which we shall hereafter see face to face.”² “All human nature in the Person of Christ, the Son of Man, was glorified on the Mount of Transfiguration, for it was the prevision of the perfect harmony to which God wills the saints to attain in the new creation. . . . As we have borne the image of the earthly, so shall we bear the image of the heavenly.”

T. A. GURNEY.

¹ Didon, “Jesus Christ,” vol. i., pp. 472-479.

² Lindsay’s “Anni Domini,” vol. i., p. 310.

