

The Transfiguration

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It was about a week after Peter's momentous confession of Jesus as the Christ at Caesarea Philippi that Jesus took him up a high mountain, together with James and John. As Mark tells the story of what happened (Mark ix. 2-8), it is not difficult to discern behind his third-person narrative the account which Peter himself was accustomed to give in the first person. If we change 'they' and 'them' to 'we' and 'us', and put the pronoun 'I' in place of Peter', this is the result:

'He was transfigured before us, and his garments became glistening, intensely white, as no fuller on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to us Elijah with Moses; and they were talking to Jesus. And I said to Jesus, "Master, it is well that we are here; let us make three booths, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." For I did not know what to say, for we were exceedingly afraid. And a cloud overshadowed us, and a voice came out of the cloud, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him." And suddenly looking around we no longer saw any one with us but Jesus only.'

Even the RSV, with the appropriate changes of pronouns, is a little more literary than Peter's account would be. If one thing more than another bespeaks the description of an eyewitness, it is the attempt to convey just how white Jesus' clothes appeared during the transfiguration—'no laundry ever made clothes so white as that!'

Peter, acting as spokesman for the 'Twelve, had acknowledged Jesus to be the Messiah. Lest they should be under any misapprehension about the character and goal of His Messiahship, or about the risks involved in continuing to follow such a Messiah, Jesus began to tell them about the death which He faced. To follow Him was to follow a man who was on his way to crucifixion, and anyone who thought of being His disciple might as well start carrying his cross at once, as convicted criminals did to the place of execution. There is nothing figurative in His words about taking up the cross if they would conic after Him. In the circumstances of those days it was more likely than not that when a leader was crucified, some at least of his followers would be crucified too.

But lest they should too quickly decide that following Him was no longer worth the risk involved, He told them further that their decision should be made not according to the canons of worldly prudence, but in the light of the age to come. To 'lose' their lives in His cause was the surest way of saving them; to avoid the dangers and disrepute which being His followers would bring upon them was the surest way to incur eternal loss. Decisions should be taken in view of the day when the Son of man would come in His Father's glory with His holy angels—the day of review and reward.

It is at this point that the words occur, 'Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power' (Mark ix. 1, RSV)—and it is no accident that these words are immediately followed by the transfiguration narrative. The meaning of these words was not exhausted by the transfiguration; the kingdom

of God came with power at the descent of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost. But the transfiguration provides an anticipatory

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vision of what the powerful coming of the kingdom of God would mean.

For a few moments the heavenly glory which was normally veiled by the conditions of our Lord's incarnate life shone through His body and its covering. The three apostles who were granted the vision could perhaps not have said whether they were in the body or out of the body; but they saw more of the glory of the Lord in the holy mount than ever Moses had seen at Sinai. There are features in common between the transfiguration narrative and some of our Lord's resurrection appearances which will repay closer study; but it was surely His body of glory (Philippians iii. 21) that Peter, James and John were permitted to see in advance. He had spoken of His impending passion. and of His rising on the third day; but now they were able to look still further into the future.

Moses and Elijah represent the Law and the Prophets, the old order which was now being replaced by the new. Luke tells us that the subject of their conversation with Jesus was 'his departure, which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem' (Luke ix. 31, RSV). His departure is literally His 'exodus'; there is probably an indication that this forthcoming exodus was to fulfil that earlier exodus in which Moses had taken a part. Or we may be reminded of the departure out of this world which Moses and Elijah had experienced in their several ways—Moses put to sleep on Pisgah by the touch of God and Elijah caught up in a whirlwind—how different in both cases from the departure which Jesus 'was to accomplish at Jerusalem'! Yet it was with a view to Him and His passion that the Law and the Prophets had discharged their appointed functions: it was to Him and His passion that they pointed forward. God's righteousness, says Paul, the way of life in Christ, is something to which 'the law and the prophets bear witness' (Romans iii. 21); and here they are, on the mount of transfiguration, hearing that witness before they recede into the background.

Here, for Peter and his companions, was the 'moment of truth'; if only they could hold it, so that it would not dissolve before their eyes! How good it would be to remain there for ever! Why not erect three booths where their Master might reside with Moses and Elijah? So Peter spoke, not knowing what to say—or, as Luke puts it, 'not knowing what lie said' (Luke ix. 33). For, of course, the whole point of the vision meant that they could not stay there. It was good to be there indeed, but if the vision was to be fulfilled, they must descend to the plain and follow the road to Jerusalem. The kingdom could not come with power until Jesus had accomplished His exodus there.

The cloud which suddenly enveloped them is surely to be understood as the cloud of the divine presence, the cloud of the shekinah. Indeed, we are not left to speculate about that, for the voice which spoke from the cloud was the voice of God the Father: 'This is my beloved Son; listen to him.' 'This is my beloved Son' had been proclaimed from heaven before. at the beginning of Jesus public ministry; the same divine approval is now voiced towards the end of that ministry. 'My Son' marks Him out as the Messiah, 'my beloved' (or, as in Luke ix. 35, RSV. 'my Chosen') marks Him out as the Servant (just as the heavenly voice at His baptism addressed Him in terms of Psalm ii. 7 and Isaiah xlii. 1). And the words 'listen to him' mark Him out as the great Prophet to whom Moses pointed forward in Deuteronomy xviii. 15. The Law, the Prophets and the Psalms alike bear their testimony to Him. Moses had been the

spokesman and servant of God in his (lay, and the people were directed to listen to him. Elijah and the other prophets also served God as His spokesmen, and the people disre-

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garded them at their peril. But now God, having spoken 'in many and various ways... by the prophets', has spoken His final and abiding word in Christ. The testimony of Moses and the prophets retains its validity because it is testimony to Christ; now that He has conic to whom they bore their witness they say 'This is He' and withdraw from our sight. They have said their say, but now—'listen to Him!' Fittingly, then, when the Father's voice had spoken and the cloud had lifted, no-one was seen but Jesus. But His presence was and remains enough; all that God has to say to mankind is embodied in Him.

John's Gospel has no transfiguration story; but his whole Gospel is in a sense a commentary on the transfiguration. 'We beheld his glory', says John, and endeavours to make his readers enter into the experience which was granted to the three on the mount. In later years all three could understand how the glory which they had seen in those concentrated moments was really manifested through all that their Master was and did—if only they had had eyes to see at the time.

We live in the days when the heavenly power has descended; it has never been withdrawn. Moses and Elijah. with all the Old Testament saints, still bear their witness to Christ: to its their witness is all the clearer in the light of what He accomplished at Jerusalem. The disciples of Jesus are still too prone to sleep and to speak out of turn. But the voice of God still sounds, to arouse and direct us: 'This is my beloved Son: listen to him!'

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