

LAST SUNDAY IN EPIPHANY February 14, 2021 St. Alban's Staten Island

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

On the *Last Sunday after the Epiphany* we confront the *Transfiguration*, an event which provides a concluding bookend to complement the opening one --- the *baptism of Jesus* on the first Sunday in Epiphany. These episodes announce revelations or discoveries of the identity of Jesus as God's Son, the Messiah. Today's event occurs six days after something which is unspecified. However, we suspect that this time frame refers to a period beginning with Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi and Jesus' first passion prediction. Also, six days may be a reference to the cloud which hovered over Mt. Sinai for a similar number of days when Moses received the law from Yahweh, or to the festival of the Booths or Tabernacles which occurs six days after the Day of Atonement in the Old Testament.

More importantly, the incident we refer to as the *Transfiguration* appears to be a fulfillment of Jesus' words in the first verse of chapter 9 of Mark's gospel about seeing the kingdom of God having come with power. Certainly, it is "narrated from the point of view of the disciples' experience rather than that of Jesus." And the "otherworldly character" of the scene shows that their eschatological understanding of what they witnessed (that is, the "scribal teaching on the coming of Elijah") was what "might be expected to be evoked" by Jesus' statement about the kingdom having come in power. And clearly, Peter, James, and John "were caught up into an incident which enabled them to see God's sovereignty affirmed and his purpose working out in the coming of his Messiah."

What is distinctive here is that "the experience of the three disciples on the mountain is that their vision of divine power and glory *preceded* the apparent defeat of the cross." While this episode is unique to Mark's gospel, "the voice from heaven echoes the voice after Jesus' baptism, and the two announcements together (at the baptism and on the mountaintop) offer the most direct testimony to Jesus' identity as the Son of God" as declared "on the authority of God himself." The secret is being shared, "even if it is still to only a handful of chosen disciples." And this in sharp contrast to "the humiliation just predicted in chapter 8, verse 31 ('Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.')

There are multiple themes here, masterfully articulated: (1) "the visible alteration of Jesus before their eyes demonstrates him to be more than a merely human teacher; (2) his association with Elijah and Moses demonstrates his messianic role; and (3) the voice from heaven declares his identity as the Son of God." Behind Mark's telling of this incident "are clear echoes of the Old Testament," proving once again how crucial the Hebrew scriptures at the time of Jesus (because no "new" testament yet existed) are to comprehending the Gospel record. We need to remind ourselves that this entire story takes place in an exclusively Jewish world and is incomprehensible apart from that reality. Part of the uniqueness of

Mark's account is that "even the resurrection appearances of Jesus recorded in the other gospels do not offer a useful parallel" to this arresting story.

N. T. Wright, one of the foremost scholars of the New Testament, has said that "it's easy enough to dismiss such an experience as a hallucination, albeit a very odd one. Jewish scriptures and traditions tell of various events like this, when the veil of ordinariness that normally prevents us from seeing the 'inside' of a situation is drawn back, and a fuller reality is disclosed....but unless we allow sceptics to bully us we should be free to affirm that this sort of thing has indeed happened to some people...and that such people usually regard it as hugely important and life-changing." And indeed, as other scholars have asserted, the author of the gospel of Mark intentionally linked the image of the tearing of the heavens (at the baptism of Jesus) with the tearing of the veil of the temple at the precise end of his career, as well as with the account of the Transfiguration in the middle of his gospel. He created this triptych to convey the idea that "the heavenly fabric (had been torn)" to symbolize "the barrier or boundary that (was) being crossed at those points (to signify) the transformative or initiatory nature of these moments."

One of the things we can note here with real interest is that "the religious imagination of later antiquity was able to project into the image of the garment (recall that the passage in Mark tells us that Jesus' clothes "became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them") a symbol for a radically transformative self-knowledge." As such, the many examples from both the Hebrew and the Greco-Roman record of "garment imagery" express a kind of "collective intuition that the introjection of psychic energy can result in a decisive transformation of the self." And even for those of us living in a modern, scientific world, we can all acknowledge that the experience of suddenly seeing things in a totally different way through a kind of extreme epiphany when things come into focus as they do on a microscopic view of a glass slide is genuine, is revelatory, is transformative, and is even common, in ways we don't fully comprehend. We simply call them "Aha!" moments.

Here, both Moses and Elijah recall the Jewish tradition which was viewed as crucial in anticipating Jesus; each is associated with both the law and the prophets. And both beheld "Yahweh's epiphany on a mountain at crucial periods of discouragement" in the mission of the disciples. The white clothing, in addition to conveying an otherworldly aura was also symbolic of martyrdom, and once again the disciples are depicted as slow of wit and nearly always in need of much clarification to grasp what Jesus tries so desperately to teach them. If at his baptism, the words of the voice declaring Jesus to be God's beloved son are heard only by Jesus and later readers or hearers of the story, at the Transfiguration they are direct witnesses of a repeat of the original message identifying Jesus as the Messiah and Son of the living God.

One thing is clear, when God says to the disciples "Listen to him," the message is surprisingly insistent. Yet we also know that even Peter who has already acknowledged Jesus as the Son of God, remains

confused about the mission of his master, and his vision is wrong-headed despite frequent suggestions from Our Lord. In particular, the disciples seem incapable of understanding why Jesus, this man they hold in such high esteem as God's beloved Son, should have to be betrayed, suffer and die as a common criminal. Peter is so incapable of comprehending this that Jesus later turns on him and denounces him as Satan's little helper. That was what Jesus was dealing with ---- the complete inability of his closest associates to see that the Messiah they had come to know did not resemble what they had learned about what Israel's savior would actually be like when he finally arrived. In their simplicity, the disciples simply could not comprehend that it would be through an "inglorious mode of human desertion, pain and suffering" that God's glory or presence would be made known to the world.

Ultimately, "the transfigured Jesus isn't supposed to be figured out. He's supposed to be *appreciated*." Jesus here becomes "a beacon, like a lighthouse planted in the middle of a desert." On this Sunday, the last in those which come after the Epiphany of January 6, we have "a promise that Jesus can and will be noticed" because "epiphanies aren't always subtle. This one will lead directly into the holy season of Lent.

As the prayer books reminds us on Ash Wednesday each year, "**I invite you...to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word. And to make a right beginning of repentance, and as a mark of our mortal nature, let us pray:**

Almighty God, you have created us out of the dust of the earth: Grant *that ashes may be to us a sign of our mortality and penitence*, that we may remember that it is only by your gracious gift that we are given everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Savior.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Sources

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