

Commentary to the Transfiguration of the Lord

TRANSFIGURATION OF THE LORD

To contemplate his transfigured face: an experience that every disciple must do.



Introduction

Immediately after the story of the Transfiguration, the three Synoptic Gospels tell the story of the healing of an epileptic boy. Jesus comes down from the mountain with Peter, James, and John. They see a man break away from the crowd, running to him and ask him for help. My son, my only child—he says—"when the evil spirit seizes him, he suddenly screams. The spirit throws him into a fit, and he foams at the mouth, wearing him out. I begged your disciples to drive it out, but they could not" (Lk 9:38-40).

Jesus had given them "power and authority to drive out all evil spirits and heal diseases" (Lk 9:1). Why were they not able to carry out their mission?

The reason is soon found: because they have not been on the mountain with the Master. Those who have not seen his glorious face cannot effectively fight the forces of evil that afflict humanity.

Tradition places the transfiguration of Jesus on Mount Tabor, a mountain that rises, isolated, in the middle of the fertile plain of Esdraelon. Covered with holm oak, carobs, and pine trees since ancient times, it was called the holy mountain and on top, cults to the pagan gods were offered. Today the place invites meditation and prayer. There it is natural to raise our gaze to the sky and our thought to God. No matter how impressive this experience, it should be noted that the gospel does not speak of Tabor, but of a high mountain. In biblical language, the mountain does not indicate a material place, but the inner experience of a manifestation of God, when the intimacy with the Lord culminates.

Resorting to the language of the mystics we could call it the spiritual condition of the soul that feels dissolved in God, reaching almost to identify with his thoughts and his feelings.

Jesus leaves the plain and leads some disciples to the heights; he moves them away from human reasoning and calculations to introduce them into the inscrutable designs of the Father. He makes them go up to bring them back then, transformed, to the land where they are called to work. The ones who truly love humanity and want to engage in the construction of the kingdom of God in the world must first raise their eyes to heaven, tune their thoughts and projects with those of the Lord. They must above all have “seen” the one who makes life a gift, not in the dark vestment of the loser, but wrapped in dazzling and glorious light.

On the “mountain,” Jesus looks different from how people judged him. There he experiences a metamorphosis: his disfigured face is transfigured, the darkness of failure illuminates, the worn-out suit of the servant turns into a beautiful royal robe, the darkness of death dissolves in the dawn of Easter.

To internalize the message, we will repeat:

“Lord, grant us to contemplate the face of the transfigured Christ in the disfigured face of people.”

-----1st Reading | 2nd Reading | Gospel-----

First reading: Daniel 7:9-10,13-14

The chapter from which the reading is taken opens with a dramatic night vision. Daniel sees emerging from the ocean—it was the symbol of the hostile world and chaos in the ancient Middle East—four huge beasts: a lion, a bear, a leopard and a fourth terrible beast, fearful, by the exceptional strength, capable of crushing everything with its iron teeth (Dn 7:2-8).

The language and images are apocalyptic. References and allusions to the history of the peoples who are symbolized are not difficult to decode because it is the same prophet, in the sequel of the story, who clarifies their meaning (Dn 7:17-27). The fierce animals are the four great empires that have taken place in the world and oppressed the people of God.

The lion indicates the bloody reign of Babylon, the damned one, the cruel city that destroyed Jerusalem

and its temple; the bear is the people of Mede, greedy and always ready to attack; the leopard with four heads is the symbol of Persian peering in every direction on the prey; the fourth beast, the scariest, depicts the reign of Alexander the Great and his successors, the Diadochi or the six Macedonian generals.

Of these, one is particularly sinister, Antiochus IV, the persecutor of the saints faithful to the law of God. He holds power in the time in which the book of Daniel was redacted. In history, reigns, which were cruel and merciless with the weak, have always succeeded. They were empires that violated the rights of peoples and imposed themselves with violence and abuse of power and behaved like wild beasts.

Will the world always be a victim of arrogant rulers whose god is their force? Will the Lord be indifferent to the oppression of his people? These are the distressing questions that Daniel, in the name of God, wants to answer. Here the great scene taken from the first part of our reading is introduced (vv. 9-12).

Thrones are placed in heaven. An old man—representing the Lord himself—is seated for judgment and pronounces the sentence: the beasts are deprived of power and the last one is killed, torn into pieces and thrown into the fire (Dn 7:9-12). Then what happens? The seer continues to report his revelation: “I continued watching the nocturnal vision. One like a son of man came on the clouds of heaven. He faced the One of Great Age. Dominion, honor and kingship were given him.”

‘Son of Man’ is a Hebrew expression that simply means man. People driven by animal instincts have always managed the world; now no more, one is coming, one with a human heart. Who is this character? He does not come from the sea as the four monsters, but from heaven, that is from God.

The author of the Book of Daniel was not thinking of an individual, he was referring to Israel that, after the great tribulation endured under Antiochus IV, would have received from God an everlasting kingdom that would never set. All the peoples would be subjugated to him without being oppressed because their king would have had a man’s heart.

With this prophecy, written during the persecution of the wicked Antiochus IV (167-164 B.C.), the author wanted to infuse courage and hope in his people. Oppression—he assured—was coming to an end; still a few years and God would hand Israel the domination of the world.

When is this prophecy fulfilled? After two or three years, Israel managed to gain political independence, and many felt that it was finally the reign of the “son of man” promised by Daniel. The facts, unfortunately, belied these expectations. The Maccabees—heroic leaders of the Jewish resistance—conquered the throne, soon forgot the covenant with the Lord and turned into oppressors. They continued to recite the script of the beasts: family feuds, intrigues for power, cruelty, refined court life, religious and moral corruption.

Prophecy—now we know it—is not fulfilled with them, but with the advent of Jesus, the “son of man” who began the reign of the saints of the Most High (Mk 14:62). He has staged new actors to recite the ancient script. He changed the script, has introduced a new policy, opposite to what, in every age, has given rise to realms of wild animals: no more climbing to dominate but going down to receive orders;

not the enslavement of the weak, but the service rendered to the weak.

His reign did not start with a victory, but in defeat. The political powers, economic and religious of his time have coalesced to eliminate him and they killed him, certain that they had ended his proposal. Instead, his defeat marked the beginning of the new world.

Having in itself a divine power, this kingdom of the Son of man, despite the angry opposition that he will always have to deal with, is intended to expand itself and to take possession of all hearts. It will be “like the dawn that becomes brighter until the fullness of day” (Pro 4:18).

Second reading: 2 Peter 1:16-19

The early Christians—and Paul himself—were convinced that the Lord would soon manifest himself in his glory, and would introduce his faithful in his kingdom. Towards the end of the first century A.D. however, a delusion began to spread among the disciples for the Lord’s failure to come, while the unbelievers mockingly asked: “What has become of the coming of this promise? Since our fathers in faith died, everything still goes on as it was from the beginning of the world” (2 P 3:4).

To undermine the faith of the disciples, some skeptics spread even the suspicion that the prophecy of the coming of the Lord was nothing but a myth developed by clever people in order to control naive and gullible people.

A disciple of Peter answers to these malevolent insinuations. Writing in the name of the master, he contends, as irrefutable evidence of the truth of the message announced, the personal experience of Peter “on the holy mountain” and the testimony given by the apostles who “saw” the greatness of the Lord Jesus. Wrapped in the glory of a divine epiphany, they have “heard” the voice of Heaven: “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”

It was not an invented fairy tale. It was a revelation received by those who have lived with Jesus of Nazareth. They, illuminated from above, have contemplated his bright and glorious face.

He continues: we are like sentinels who keep watch at night and stare at the horizon, anxiously waiting for the bright “morning star” (Rev 2:28; 22:16), the bearer of a new day, to appear.

In anticipation of this joyous sunrise, the faces of believers are enlightened and their steps guided by a lamp shining in a world still shrouded in dense darkness. The lamp is the word of God transmitted by the sacred Scriptures (v. 19).

Gospel: Matthew 17:1-9

One should always be very cautious when approaching a text of the Gospel because of that which, at first glance, seems to be a chronicle of facts, at a closer look, it often reveals itself a text of theology drawn up according to the canons of biblical language. The account of the Transfiguration of Jesus, reported almost identically by Mark, Matthew, and Luke, is an example.

It is the responsibility of the biblical scholar to identify the literary form of the story, to evidence the references to the Old Testament and decode the various images, in a way that the passage can emerge, neat—the message that the evangelist intends to communicate. The gospel passage proposed to us today requires an attentive approach and an accurate study, even if it will seem meticulous and perhaps even a bit arid.

It opens with a seemingly irrelevant entry: “After six days.” After what? It is not said, but the reference seems to be the most likely debate about the identity of Jesus that occurred in the region of Caesarea Philippi (Mt 16:13-20). There, Peter professed his faith in Jesus: “You are the Messiah” but the dreams he had were not those of the master, who in fact admonished him: “You are thinking not as God does, but as people do” and he enjoined the disciples not to tell anyone (Mt 16:20). First, he had to correct the mistake, the misunderstanding about his identity as Messiah: they stubbornly continue to want him to orient towards success, while the goal established by God was found in the opposite direction. It is in this context of change of mentality that Matthew places the “transfiguration.” Jesus takes with him three disciples and goes up the mountain.

The mountain, in the Bible—as, indeed, among all peoples of antiquity—was the site of the encounter with God. It was on the mountain that Moses had the manifestation of God and received the revelation that later was passed on to the people. It was also at the top of Horeb that Elijah met the Lord.

There’s more. If we read Exodus 24 we find that of Moses it was said “after six days” (Ex 24:16), he did not go alone, but took Aaron, Nadab and Abihu with him (Ex 24:1,9), and was enveloped in a cloud. On the mountain, even his face was transfigured by the splendor of God’s glory (Ex 34:30). It is enough to conclude that, with these Old Testament allusions, the evangelist intended to communicate a message. He intends to present Jesus as the new Moses, as the one who delivers the new law to the new people, represented by the three disciples. Jesus is the definitive revelation of God.

The shining face and bright robes (v. 2). These are also the reasons that recur often in the Bible. We found them in the first reading; the author of the Psalms used them. The Lord is “covered with majesty and splendor, wrapped in light as with a garment,” says the Psalmist (Ps 104:1-2).

Resuming these images, the evangelist makes an authentic profession of faith in the divinity of Jesus.

The meaning of the luminous cloud that envelops all with its shadow is identical (v. 5). The book of Exodus speaks of a luminous cloud that protected the people of Israel in the desert (Ex 13:21), a sign of God’s presence that accompanied his people along the way. When Moses received the law, the mountain was enveloped by a cloud (Ex 24:15-16). He also came down with the shining face (Ex 39:29-35). Cloud and shining face are therefore a reflection of God’s presence.

Using these images, Matthew says that Peter, James, and John, in a particularly significant moment of their lives, have been introduced to the world of God and have enjoyed an enlightenment that made them understand the true identity of the Master and the destination of his journey. He would not be the glorious Messiah they expected, but a Messiah who, after a severe conflict with the religious power, would be opposed, persecuted and killed. They also realized that their fate would be no different from that of the Master.

The voice from heaven (v. 5) is a literary expression frequently used by the rabbis when, at the end of a long discussion, they made conclusions and presented the thought of God.

The topic discussed in the previous chapter (Mt 16) concerned the identity of Jesus. The Master himself had opened the debate with the question: “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” (Mt 16:13). After exposing the various opinions, the apostles, by the mouth of Peter, had expressed their conviction that he is the long-awaited messiah. The voice from the sky—introduced in the story of the transfiguration—declares the opinion of God: “Jesus is the beloved,” the faithful servant of whom God is well pleased (Is 42:1).

This “voice” that declared the same words was already heard at baptism. “This is my beloved Son” (Mt 3:17). Now an exhortation is added: “Listen to him.” Listen to him, even when he seems to propose too demanding paths, to indicate the narrow and steep ways, paradoxical and humanly absurd choices.

In the Bible, the word “to listen” does not just mean, “to hear” but is often equivalent to “to obey” (Ex 6:12; Mt 18:15-16). The recommendation that the Father gives to Peter, James, and John, and through them, to all the disciples, is “to put into practice” that what Jesus teaches. It is the invitation to focus one’s life on the proposal of the beatitude.

Who are Moses and Elijah? The first is the one who gave the Law to his people; the other was considered the first of the prophets. For the Israelites, these two characters represented the Holy Scriptures. All the holy books of Israel are meant to lead to a dialogue with Jesus; they orient toward him. Without him, the Old Testament is incomprehensible, but also Jesus, without the Old Testament, remains a mystery. On Easter day, to make the meaning of his death and resurrection clear to his disciples, he will resort to the Old Testament: “Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he explained to them everything in the Scriptures concerning himself” (Lk 24:27).

The meaning of the image of the three tents is not easy to determine. Sure they refer to the path of the exodus and here they indicate, perhaps, the desire of Peter to stop, to perpetuate the joy experienced in a moment of spiritual intimacy with the Master. The one who builds a tent wants to fix his abode in one place and not move, at least for a time. Jesus instead is always on the move. He goes directly to a destination and the disciples must follow him.

Our own spiritual experience can help us to understand: after having spoken at length with God, we are not willing to go back to everyday life—the problems, social conflicts and family disagreements, the dramas we must confront frighten us, yet we know that listening to the word of God is not everything. The “healthy” rapport with the Lord does not lead to withdrawal to oneself, does not close one in a sterile spiritual intimacy. It is necessary to go out to meet and serve the brothers and sisters, to help those who suffer, to be close to anyone in need of love. After discovering in prayer the way to go, it is necessary to put oneself in following Jesus who goes up to Jerusalem to offer his life. Let us summarize the meaning of the scene: the whole Old Testament (Moses and Elijah) receives direction from Jesus. Peter does not understand the meaning of what is happening. Although in words he proclaims Jesus as “the Christ” (Mt 16:16), he remains profoundly convinced that he is just a great character, a man at the level of Moses and Elijah, for this, he suggests that three equal tents be built.

God intervenes to correct the false interpretation of Peter: Jesus is not just a great legislator or a mere prophet, he is the “beloved Son” of the Father. The three characters cannot continue to be together any longer. Jesus stands out clearly from the others and is absolutely superior.

Israel had listened to the voice of the Lord, which had been transmitted by Moses and the prophets. Now this voice—Peter says—comes to people through Christ. It is he and him alone that the disciples should listen to. It is noted that, when the three look up, they see no others but Jesus. Moses and Elijah are gone, they have already accomplished their mission: they have presented to the world the Messiah, the new prophet, the new lawgiver.

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