

The Transfiguration of Our Lord

For the last few Sundays, our readings have been zoning in on the Biblical lives of Peter, James, and John. The Apostle Paul in Galatians 2 calls them the “pillars of the faith”. Our Saviour called twelve disciples to be his Apostles. Out of those twelve, he was especially close to these three. It is not that the other nine didn’t see miraculous things too, but these three are singled out to witness the most special of miraculous revelations.

Today Peter, James and John are once again at the centre of significant events. What a divine grace it was for them to see Jesus transfigured. Through it they got a preview of the later glory of Jesus being risen from the dead and ascending to his glory in heaven. It is also a preview of the glory every Christian hopes to share with him.

The Transfiguration is not the only special grace Jesus intimately shared with Peter, James and John. Earlier in Mark and Luke’s Gospels we read that Jesus only allowed these three to enter with him into the house of Jairus, the synagogue leader, whose daughter was pronounced dead and Jesus raised up again¹. Later, when Jesus is teaching in the temple, Peter, James and John ask Jesus a question privately and he gives them special teaching and explanation that is clearly only meant for them.² In Gethsemane, whilst Jesus is praying during his final hours, Jesus takes them aside to be near him during his agony.³ So these three receive many extra snippets of the wider story and numerous special graces from Jesus. Each time they are able to bask momentarily in the divine radiance that is God.

Just before seeing Jesus transfigured, he tells his disciples that he must suffer greatly, be rejected, be killed and rise after three days.⁴ How did they react? Well, Peter rebukes Jesus for saying this and Jesus responds by telling Peter, “Get behind me, Satan. You are thinking not of divine things, but of human things”.⁵

It took a long time for the disciples to learn that Jesus was not going to be the type of Messiah that they were all expecting. Jesus was not a Messiah who would physically liberate Palestine from Roman domination. Jesus was to be a suffering Messiah and would be executed. His power would be spiritual and through it would liberate human beings’ souls and entire beings from the clutches of a much more destructive oppressor. This must have been difficult for the disciples to take.

It is no surprise then that immediately following this we read that Peter, James and John saw Jesus transfigured.⁶ How they needed this grace now! Jesus had revealed to them his role in God’s great

¹ Mark 5:37; Luke 8:51

² Mark 13:3

³ Mark 14:33

⁴ Matt 16:21; Mark 8:31; Luke 9:22

⁵ Matt 16:22-23; Mark 8:32-33

⁶ Matt 17:1-9; Mark 9:2-10; Luke 9:28-36

plan, but it didn't seem to offer much by way of resistance in their nation's time of military need? At this moment they need reassurance, and Jesus does not let them down.

After a tiring climb, they stand on the edge of the mountain. They can feel the mist on their faces and the visibility begins to diminish. Suddenly they receive the most magnificent grace that they could wish for – as they now stand on the mountain they see Jesus transfigured.

Moses and Elijah also appear and speak with Jesus. Moses received the Law from God some 1400 years earlier and Elijah, possibly the greatest of all the prophets, prophesied to Israel 800 years before Jesus. Moses represents the law and Elijah represents all Old Testament prophets. The Law and the Prophets are Israel's entire history as depicted in the Old Testament. This event, then, reveals how the Old Testament is pointing forward to Jesus. Moses and Elijah appear on the mountain to confirm how Jesus as Son of Man is the culmination of all that God had done before.

Then the Father speaks from heaven and says, "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him." The Old Testament and our Father in heaven are now confirming that Jesus is indeed the expected Messiah, God's own Son. For Peter, James and John, this is the affirmation they desperately need. Although Jesus had just shocked them by telling them he must suffer and die, they are now fully aware that this much bigger vision is, in fact, God's plan for Jesus and the salvation of all the world.

The Father said, "Listen to him." In other words, "Do not be scandalized at the teaching of my son."

Will they listen to Jesus? Will they stand by Jesus as he goes to his Passion and death? We know the story. Peter denies Jesus in the courtyard of the high priest and James, like all the rest of the disciples, abandons him. Only John listens to Jesus and is not scandalized by his passion and shameful death. In John's Gospel we read that John goes right into the courtyard of the high priest while Jesus is being tried and all the way to the cross with the women afterwards. When push comes to shove, Peter and James do not listen, they abandon Jesus, whilst John remains faithful right to the end. All the same, their abandonment was only temporary. Later all three of them, Peter, James and John, become great witnesses to Jesus. Peter became the first bishop of Rome, James was executed in Jerusalem for his faith by King Herod⁷ and John wrote a Gospel and oversaw his own church community during a time of great persecution. So these three apostles did listen to Jesus in the end. They are all now eternally basking in the radiance that is God.

Perhaps, however, we are disappointed that Peter and James did not listen to Jesus when it mattered, did not remain faithful to him during the time he most needed them? They had seen Jesus transfigured, they heard the command of the Father to listen to Jesus, they had been with Jesus for other intimate moments that no other apostles had been chosen to witness, but were scandalized by

⁷ Acts 12:2

Jesus' trial and death. But why should we be disappointed with them? We also have experienced and met Jesus in many ways and sometimes we too may have let him down. But so long as we remain honest and do try and deceive ourselves and God about the times we get things wrong, Jesus treats us to special moments of grace too and we too can bask momentarily in the radiance that is God

- We meet Jesus in a most intimate way every time we receive him in the Eucharist. It is the time when we are closest to Jesus.
- We meet Jesus in the Scriptures. He speaks to us every time we read the Bible. The Scriptures are not just about the life of Jesus; in the Scriptures Jesus speaks intimately to each of us about our lives and about how we may serve his body on earth, the Church.
- We meet Jesus in a very special way in all the sacraments of baptism, Eucharist, confession, confirmation, holy matrimony, ordination, and healing (especially at the time of death, commonly known as the Last Rites).
- We have seen Jesus in great people like Archbishop Desmond Tutu or Mother Teresa, and numerous other good Christian examples, and they offer us a wonderful model to emulate...

Jesus loves us and is always with us, but that does not mean that we do not need to work at allowing him to transform us. Just as Peter and James had to come to realise their own wrongdoing after they abandoned him, and then needed to know following his resurrection that Jesus had forgiven them for their failure to stay with him, we need to be reconciled to Jesus often too.

We need to meet Jesus in confession and in the Eucharist, because there are times when we do not listen to Jesus, times when we deny Jesus, not in the courtyard of the high priest in Jerusalem, but maybe sometimes in our families, or perhaps where we work, or in our communities, or maybe in our response to the great issues facing our world. We do not have to be conquered or governed by our weaknesses, sinfulness or fear. Just as Peter, James and John received the special grace of seeing Jesus transfigured, we too have received many graces from him to help us become the great people he has called us to be, that we too may bask in the divine radiance that is God.

Let us have this faith then which banishes all fear. We have beside us, facing us, in us, our Lord Jesus, our God who loves us infinitely, is all powerful, knows what is best for us, and tells us to seek the kingdom. So let us allow ourselves to be transformed through the body of our Lord, by banishing all fear and bitterness and entering into the image of our God through our self-giving service to his people, his body, his Church.

Amen.

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