

# The Transfiguration of the Lord

<i>First Reading</i>	Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14
<i>Response</i>	The Lord is king the Most High over all the earth.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 97:1-2, 5-6, 9
<i>Second Reading</i>	2 Peter 1:16-19
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 17:1-9, Luke 9:28b-36, Mark 9:2-10

The second reading for the feast of the Transfiguration in years A, B, and C comes from the 2 Peter in 1:16-19. This is a really neat passage because it is one of the few times in the Catholic epistles, in the letters, that we have an allusion in one of the Catholic letters to an event that's mentioned in the Gospels. In this case, in 2 Peter, Peter here is alluding to the experience of the Transfiguration on the mountain, as a validation of his and the other apostles' authority to those to whom they're writing. So it's a fascinating text. So just take a minute to look at this. In verse 16, we read:

For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honor and glory from God the Father and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,” we heard this voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain.

And then the passage goes on to say:

And we have the prophetic word made more sure. You will do well to pay attention to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

And then thelectionary doesn't have this, but I'll just read the last two verses because they're interesting. It says:

First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

So the reason I add that part at the end is not only because that's a crucial text in the whole debate over sola scriptura and the relationship between Scripture or Tradition and the living Magisterium in the interpretation of Scripture, but also because it gives you the context. Basically, what Peter is saying here to his audience is that they are to accept the authority of the Apostles and to pay attention to the teaching of the Apostles in the same way that they would pay attention to Scripture. Because the imagery here of:

You will do well to pay attention to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.

That image of a lamp that gives light is the same image that's used for the word of God in the Old Testament, right? "Your word," like it says in the Psalms, "is a lamp unto my feet and light to my path." That's from Psalm 119. In that Psalm, that image of a lamp shining in darkness is used for the word of God. And so what Peter is saying here to his audience is just like you would pay attention to Scripture as a lamp in a dark place, so too pay attention to us because we have the prophetic word made sure, made certain, right? So the Apostolic preaching is akin to the light that is shown by Scripture itself, because Scripture is the word of God inscribed, the Word inspired and written, but the preaching of the apostles is also the word of God, but it's the Word of God proclaimed by those who were sent out by Jesus to proclaim the Word. So this is a very powerful passage here, just in terms of how we understand the relationship between Scripture, the written Word of God, and Apostolic preaching, the proclaimed Word of God that comes to us through the teaching of the Apostles.

And we could do a whole video just on that, but I just wanted to highlight that, and in this case, what's interesting is the reason Peter gives to his audience that they

should listen to his word and the word of the other Apostles and treat it like a lamp shining in a dark place is precisely because they saw Jesus transfigured on the holy mountain. They heard the voice of the Father saying, "This is my beloved Son," and they were "eyewitnesses of the majesty of Jesus". So, this is a really powerful testimony to the importance of, sorry, it's kind of redundant, but I'll say it's an important testimony to the importance of eyewitness testimony in the early Church, right? Sometimes when people discuss the early Church, they will emphasize the creativity of the early Church, the fact that the Church wasn't hesitant to make things up and attribute them to Jesus, that really what matters is the moral or the spiritual implications, the moral directives of a particular story, not the event itself or what happened behind it. The Gospels are more like folklore or legends than they are like biographies or history. And in other videos, I've covered how that view is impossible to square with what the Gospels themselves say about the kind of literature they are. They are not folklore or legend, they're ancient biographies. And Luke, in chapter one, for example, will emphasize that he's telling the truth about what happened. In the ending of the Gospel of John, John the Evangelist will likewise say similar things, like "he who saw it has borne witness, and we know his testimony is true." So the truth of the testimony about the events that are being described in the Gospels is something that's part of their literary genre.

But here in 2 Peter for today, it's interesting that he contrasts their role, the Apostles' role, the "we" of the apostles as eyewitnesses, *epoptai* is the word there. It's the same term that gets used by Luke to describe the people whom he consulted when he was writing his Gospel. He looked at those who were eyewitnesses from the beginning, in other words, those who had seen the events. The same thing is being said here, where Peter in 2 Peter is contrasting eyewitnesses to the Transfiguration with cleverly devised myths, right? The Greek word there, *mythos*, is the same word that's used to describe the Greek myths, like Ovid's *Metamorphoses* or some of the myths about the various gods and goddesses, whether the Roman gods or the Greek gods. So this is an important passage because in it, Peter in 2 Peter is making clear that the kind of thing that the Apostles are proclaiming are different than the myths of the Greeks and the Romans, right? These are not tales that aren't true but might have a true message, which myths often will function as. No, these are the kind of things that eyewitnesses will record and report about events that actually happened.

So, 2 Peter 1 is a very important text because it testifies to the early Christian affirmation that the Transfiguration is an actual miracle that takes place in history. It's not a myth, it's not a legend, right? It's not some oral tradition that was just created out of whole cloth or out of the imagination or the Christology of the evangelists, of the Apostles, I should say. But rather, it is the Apostolic preaching, the Apostolic testimony, the Apostolic witness to something they themselves saw on the mountaintop. So, in the prologue to the Gospel of Luke, Luke says that he is basing his testimony and his gospel on the testimony of "eyewitnesses from the beginning." Now that Greek word, *autoptai*, in Luke has the same root as the word that Peter is using here in 2 Peter 1:16, when he says "we were eyewitnesses of His Majesty." Bold expressions indicate that what's being described is someone who has seen something that has actually taken place, seen something that has actually happened.

So, with all that in mind, now we'll turn to living tradition. I've mentioned Bede the Venerable's commentary here on the Catholic Epistles, which is highly recommended. It's very readable and very insightful. But I'll just end with this one quote here from Bede about 2 Peter on this whole question of myths and truths. And here's what he says about chapter one, verse 16:

Here he strikes at pagans and heretics at the same time. The former have not been afraid to call gods whatever was pleasing to them, the latter, after having received the mysteries of the true God, from then on have been inclined not to pay attention to the divine scriptures but rather to alter these to their own erroneous meaning by interpreting them wrongly.<sup>2</sup>

So it's interesting here that what Bede is saying is that 2 Peter is responding to two errors that people can fall into. One is the pagan error of treating Christianity as a myth or something that's not true, something that's not based on actual history or actual events. So he corrects that by emphasizing that they were eyewitnesses to glory. Second, though, he also corrects heretics who might be inclined to interpret the Scripture and take it out of context to distort both the Scripture and the Apostolic preaching to their own end. And Peter responds to that by saying no

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<sup>2</sup> Venerable Bede, *On 2 Peter*; trans. David Hurst.

prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, but you have to correlate your interpretation with the preaching and the teaching of the Apostles.

And I would close by emphasizing one point here, that in the 20th century, it has become popular in certain circles, especially in the wake of two great Christian authors, J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, to talk about what's called "true myth." In other words, to recognize that there are parallels between the story of salvation history, the account of salvation history in the Bible, and other ancient pagan myths and accounts of creation and humanity. And that, as Lewis put it, Christianity is different because it's a true myth. In other words, it's this great story that tells about the meaning, the origin, and the end of human existence, but unlike the other myths, this one is true, and that can be a very powerful thing. Anyone who's read the writings of Tolkien, for example, can recognize the power of myth and the power of myth to tell truth. However, it is also important to realize that that's a kind of modern expression and a modern innovation, but that in the Christian tradition and in the New Testament in particular, 2 Peter 1, the word *mythos* means a story that is not true. Right? And Peter draws a contrast between the pagan myths, between those stories that are not based on eyewitness testimony to events, and the Gospel that Peter is proclaiming orally and then also communicating through his written word to his audience. So, it's an interesting and important point that in the New Testament, at least, the word *mythos* has a negative connotation and is contrasted with the truth of the Gospel of Peter and the other Apostles as well.