

# 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

Every year on August 6, the Church celebrates the Feast of the Transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain with Peter, James, and John. This is an ancient and venerable feast. It goes back to the early Church, and it allows us another opportunity to look at the mystery of the Transfiguration. Now, as you may recall, the Church frequently gives us the Gospel accounts of the Transfiguration. Normally you will encounter it during the season of Lent, right? So usually the Second Sunday of Lent, the Church will give us the Gospel accounts of the Transfiguration in Matthew, Mark, and Luke as part of our journey from the temptation of Jesus in the desert (First Sunday of Lent). all the way through to the Passion on Palm Sunday. So it's part of this kind of short recapitulation of the life of Jesus that takes place during Lent.

But in addition to that Second Sunday of Lent, the Church also has a whole day dedicated to the mystery of the Transfiguration that is celebrated every year on August 6th. So in this video, what we're going to do, is we're going to look at the readings for the Feast of the Transfiguration on August 6 that are given to us in years A, B, and C, and what I want to emphasize in this video, because we discussed the Transfiguration elsewhere, is the relationship between the Transfiguration and the divinity of Jesus. That what the Transfiguration is, and one of the reasons it's such an important feast is because it is a singular episode in which Jesus' divine nature, which is ordinarily hidden under his human nature, his human appearance, is made manifest to Peter, James, and John; and insofar as it is revealed to them, it is a kind of anticipation, really, of the beatific vision and of the mystery of the Trinity. So let's just see if I can take a few moments to make that

point, right? So, on the Feast of the Transfiguration, August 6th, the Gospel reading cycles. So if it's going to be year A, it'll be from Matthew's account in chapter 17. If it's year B, it'll be Mark's account in Mark 9, and if it's year C, it'll be Luke's account in Luke 9. So because we've looked at those elsewhere, I'm just going to summarize some of the common elements that all three accounts of the Transfiguration share as a foundation for our discussion.

The first one is that in all three accounts of the Transfiguration, what we're really seeing here is a theophany, an appearance of God. You can know this because in the Old Testament, whenever God appears to his people, he will frequently do so on a mountain, right? So, for example, in Exodus 24 and 25, when the 12 tribes of Israel gather at the mountain, God comes down from heaven in the glory cloud and appears to the people in a theophany on the mountaintop. A second example of this is Moses in Exodus 33 and 34. When he wants to see the face of God or see the glory of God, he doesn't go to a swamp, he doesn't go to the desert, he doesn't go to a lush garden. He goes up the mountain of Sinai to encounter God in a theophany. As you may recall, God tells him, "Well, you can't see my face and live," right? So he hides Moses in the cleft of the rock and he says, "I'm going to allow you to see my backside." And it says the glory of the Lord passed by Moses in the cleft of the rock on the mountain. So a mountain is where you go to seek God in the Old Testament.

The same thing is true in 1 Kings 19, Elijah wants to see God and he goes travel for 40 days and 40 nights to Mount Sinai, Mount Horeb, and he goes up the mountain and that's when he encounters God not in lightning or thunder, but in the still small voice, a famous story in 1 Kings 19. So he comes out of the mountain, out of the cave that he's hiding in — actually, which in tradition is the same cave Moses was in, but he wraps his mantle around his face so as not to look at God. He wants to hear God, he wants to encounter God, but he knows that he can't see the face of God and live.

So you have all these Old Testament episodes when an Old Testament figure is going to see God, experience a theophany, a revelation of God, an appearance of God, they do it on a mountaintop. So it's not surprising that when Jesus is going to reveal his divinity to the disciples, a select group, Peter, James, and John, his inner circle, he doesn't go to a swamp, or even into the desert or to a forest. He takes

them up to a mountaintop, the mountain of the Transfiguration, and there it says he was transfigured before them. All three Gospels used the word *metamorphoō*. He was metamorphosed. He was changed. His appearance was changed before them so that his face shines like the sun, and his garments become white as light, the Gospels say. They become dazzling white.

What does that metamorphosis signify? What does that transformation show? Well, as we'll see in a moment, the Old Testament reading for today is from the book of Daniel. Actually, let's see it now. If you just take a second to turn back to the book of Daniel 7, it would be easier to show it than to just recount it. The reading for today on the feast of the Transfiguration might seem strange. It's from Daniel 7:9-14. This is the famous account of the coming of the Son of Man on the clouds of heaven. But if you look at it, there are a few parallels with the Transfiguration that are worth highlighting. For example, Daniel says:

As I looked, thrones were placed  
and one that was ancient of days took his seat;  
his raiment was white as snow,  
and the hair of his head like pure wool;  
his throne was fiery flames,  
its wheels were burning fire.  
A stream of fire issued  
and came forth from before him;  
a thousand thousands served him,  
and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him;  
the court sat in judgment,  
and the books were opened.

And if you skip down to verse 13:

I saw in the night visions,  
  
and behold, with the clouds of heaven  
there came one like a son of man,

and he came to the Ancient of Days  
and was presented before him.  
And to him was given dominion  
and glory and kingdom,  
that all peoples, nations, and languages  
should serve him;  
his dominion is an everlasting dominion,  
which shall not pass away,  
and his kingdom one  
that shall not be destroyed.<sup>1</sup>

Okay, why is that the background for the feast of the Transfiguration? You would think, no, the coming of the Son of Man on the clouds of heaven, that should be a background passage, that should be the Old Testament reading, say, for the Mount of Olives discourse when Jesus is talking about his final coming, about his second advent, about his Parousia. And absolutely, there are parallels. That is background to that gospel text. But it's also background to the Transfiguration because of two key elements. First, notice the Ancient of Days. When Daniel sees him, it says his clothing is white as snow and his hair like white wool, pure wool. That's what it means, right? Throne of fiery flames, wheels of burning fire. So who wears garments white like light, right, in the Old Testament? Well, it's heavenly beings. So the Ancient of Days is another name for God, and when we look at the divine vestments, they are white vestments to signify His heavenly identity.

The other thing is the presence of the cloud. When the Son of Man comes in the Old Testament, he comes on the clouds. Coming on the clouds is another mark of divinity or heavenly identity in the Old Testament. So if you look elsewhere in the Old Testament, whenever it talks about someone coming on the clouds, it's always God who comes on the clouds. And not just any kind of cloud, like a cirrus cloud or a cumulus cloud, but it's the glory cloud, the cloud of God's divine majesty and glory. So, as Old Testament scholars have pointed out, when this figure of the Son of Man appears in Daniel 7, he's paradoxical because he looks like a human being.

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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.

That's what Son of Man means. I saw one like a Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven. So he looks like a human being, but he's actually a heavenly being. He's a divine being because he does what God does. He comes on the glory cloud, He comes on the cloud of heaven, and then he's given a Kingdom where he's going to reign forever and ever over all humanity, right? And over all creation. So he's a strange figure, this Son of Man, because he looks human and divine at the same time.

Well, that's the background to the Transfiguration because when Jesus ascends the mountain in Matthew 17, Mark 9 and Luke 9, in all three Gospels, he is metamorphosed. He's transfigured so that his garments become white like light, and his face shines like the sun. In other words, he goes from looking like an earthly being to looking like a heavenly being. He goes from looking like just a man to looking like God, because the Transfiguration is nothing other than the revelation of Jesus' divine glory. What Jesus is doing in the Transfiguration is giving the disciples, and not just the disciples. Who else is there? All three Gospels agree. Moses and Elijah, the two people who wanted to see the face of God in the Old Testament but couldn't see it. Now they get to see his glory unveiled, but it's the glory of the only Son of the Father who now has taken on a human nature, who has a human face and allows them to see the face of God in the glory of the unveiled Jesus, the transfigured Jesus on the mountain.

So this is a theophany, but it's also a Christophany, because it's a revelation of the divinity, not just of God, but of Christ. And that is why you see after the apostles, again in all three Gospels, they see his glory manifested. And what does Peter want to do? He wants to build a Tabernacle, but he wants to build 3. Oh Lord, let's make 3 tabernacles, 3 tents, one for you, one for Moses, one for Elijah. Why does Peter do this? Well, if you look in the Old Testament, when do the Israelites build a Tabernacle? It's after God appears to them in the theophany on Mount Sinai. They want the divinity to dwell with them, so they build a tent. They build a portable temple as a sanctuary, right? But Peter gets it wrong here because he offers to build 3 tents, one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. Because from his point of view, I'm looking at 3 heavenly beings here, so to speak, Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. And all the Gospels say he didn't know what he was saying because his words kind of put Jesus on par with Moses and Elijah. When in fact, He is far, far above them, which the voice from heaven will confirm, because the Father will speak in all

three Gospels. And He says, "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him." So he is singled out as the divine son of God, as the heavenly son of the Father, whose divine glory is being manifested in the Transfiguration.

Which is why, by the way, the Church gives us the Psalm for today, it is from Psalm 95, which is a beautiful, powerful psalm about the kingship of the Lord over all the earth. There is a line in the Psalm which says that all peoples shall see his glory, they shall see the glory of the king. Now, in the Old Testament context, the Psalms talk about the desire for all the nations to see the glory of the Lord, the one God of Israel, but the Church is now applying that Psalm to what happens in a preliminary way on the Transfiguration mountain, where the disciples and Moses and Elijah see the glory of the Lord, that they see it in the face of his Son who is revealed not only to be the Messiah, right, but to be the divine Son of God, as both a human and a heavenly being?

So, in closing, there's just a few reflections on the Transfiguration, I'd like to close with a couple of beautiful passages from the tradition on this from the Catechism of the Catholic Church and from St. Thomas Aquinas. Oh, if you look in the Catechism, paragraph 2583...I actually cannot take credit for this insight into Moses and Elijah's presence. For years and years, I always wondered, why are Elijah and Moses present on the Transfiguration mountain? Most of the Church Fathers, most commentators will say, well, it's symbolic. You know, Moses represents the Law and Elijah represents the prophets and therefore, Moses and Elijah represent Christ fulfilling the Old Testament. He fulfills the law and He fulfills the prophets. And I think that's certainly true, although it's a little odd because Elijah isn't attributed with any of the books of the prophets. No book of the prophets is attributed to him as author. So he isn't recounted in the historical books, which the Jews will call, and Jewish tradition will call the prophets. They have the former prophets and the latter prophets. But it is not a one to one correlation. It is a little bit of a stretch that made me think something more is going on here.

I think the more adequate explanation and the more powerful explanation is what the Catechism says about Moses and Elijah's unique role in the Old Testament. In 2583, the Catechism, we read this:

Taking the desert road that leads to the place where the living and true God reveals himself to his people, Elijah, like Moses before him, hides “in a cleft of the rock” until the mysterious presence of God has passed by. *But only on the mountain of the Transfiguration will Moses and Elijah behold the unveiled face of him whom they sought...*

So, in other words, according to the Catechism, why are Moses and Elijah on the mountain of Transfiguration? Because they are able to see on the mountain of Transfiguration what they were unable to see in the Old Testament, but what they both longed to see: the unveiled face of God. And only in the incarnation can they now see it because in Jesus Christ, God has a human face. God has taken on human flesh and he now has a human face. And this is the root of so much Christian tradition, especially the iconography of the Transfiguration, right? So you'll see there's lots of art, especially in the Eastern church, dedicated to the mystery of the Transfiguration, where Christ's glory is unveiled to the three apostles and to Moses and Elijah so that they are able to see what they weren't able to see in the Old Testament: the unveiled face of God. In fact, in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, there's just an example. This just came to my mind. If you look at Part 4, the section on prayer, which is where that quote is from. There's a beautiful icon here from the Monastery of Dialysis on Mount Athos. This is painted in about the year 1059. So this is a 1000-year-old icon of Jesus, the Father, on the mountain of Transfiguration. And you can see behind him are not only the three apostles, Peter, James, and John, but also Moses and Elijah. So it's a kind of revelation where they are able to enter into the mystery of the Trinity, precisely by encountering the mystery of Christ in his prayer to the Father. So here this icon is focusing on the praying of Jesus and the relationship between Jesus and the Father as the kind of master of prayer. He's the one who teaches us to pray, and in the Transfiguration, they get a foretaste of that life of the Trinity.

There are other icons as well that are focused on the manifestation of Jesus' divinity in the Transfiguration, and in fact, that would be the other point I would want to make here. St. Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa Theologica* has a profound insight into the Transfiguration. Why do we have a whole feast dedicated to this episode? Why, for example, does August 6, if it takes place on a Sunday, it supercedes that Sunday, and we celebrate the feast of the Transfiguration. Well, the reason is because the Transfiguration isn't just a feast of one of the mysteries of

Jesus' life. It's a feast where we see and encounter the mystery of the Holy Trinity itself. Listen to the words of St. Thomas, He says this:

The whole Trinity appeared: the Father in the voice; the Son in the man; the Spirit in the shining cloud.<sup>2</sup>

So, Thomas sees something more going on here. If you look at the Transfiguration, although the word Trinity certainly does not occur, the reality of the Trinity is present. The Father is revealed through the voice: "This is my Son, my beloved Son. Listen to him." The Son is revealed through the voice and through the manifestation of his divinity in his garments becoming dazzling white and his face shining like the sun. And the Spirit is present there in the glory cloud that descends upon the mountain and surrounds Jesus and the disciples. So one reason the Transfiguration is so important is because what the disciples Moses and Elijah are experiencing there is nothing less than a revelation of the mystery of the Trinity and an anticipation of eternal life and of the beatific vision of Christ and the manifestation of the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

And so, in the Byzantine liturgy, in the Eastern Catholic liturgy, we have this beautiful prayer for the feast of the Transfiguration, which, by the way, in Eastern Catholic Churches and in Eastern Orthodox, the Feast of the Transfiguration is a very big deal. It's a major feast. And this is one prayer from the Byzantine liturgy. It's a prayer to Christ:

You were transfigured on the mountain, and your disciples, as much as they were capable of it, beheld your glory, O Christ our God, so that when they should see you crucified they would understand that your Passion was voluntary, and proclaim to the world that you truly are the splendor of the Father.<sup>3</sup>

So one last element there, the Byzantine liturgy, beautiful insight into the reason for the Transfiguration. Why does Jesus take Peter, James, and John up the

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* III, q. 45, art. 4, cited in CCC 555.

<sup>3</sup> Byzantine Liturgy, Feast of the Transfiguration, *Kontakion*, cited in CCC 555.



mountain and reveal his divinity to them? Not only as a foretaste or anticipation of heavenly glory, but also as a preparation for the passion? Because they are going to be principal witnesses to his passion and his death. Peter and John are going to follow him into the trial. Peter is going to stand by while he is condemned in the house of Caiaphas. John will be there at the foot of the cross and watch Jesus in his agony. What the Byzantine liturgy is saying here is that in order to prepare them for what they were going to see happen to the humanity of Jesus, it was fitting that God the Father would reveal the divine sonship of Jesus to them in order to fortify them to have faith and to understand that his passion was voluntary, and that although he was crucified as a man, he had already been revealed to them as God, as the divine son of the Father on the mountain of the Transfiguration.