

August 6<sup>th</sup>, 2017

Transfiguration

"For he received from God the Father honour and glory, when there came such a voice to him from the excellent glory, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." (2 Peter 1:17)

The Christian manifestation of God's glory begins its full fruition at Christ's baptism. As the Holy Ghost descends upon Him, we hear the voice of the Father declare: "Thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." (Mk. 1:11) The three occurrences, or *theophanies* if you will, of this utterance all come at the most significant moments in Jesus' ministry on earth and thus are not just "wow moments" chosen at random. They point to the three traditional roles ascribed to Him of prophet, king and priest. He is a prophet because He comes to tell us of the things of God through His preaching and healing ministry begun at the river Jordan. He is king because He is the second Person of the Blessed Trinity reigning forever in Heaven, manifested so dramatically on Mt. Tabor. He is a priest because He offers the one liturgical oblation, to which all the blood offerings of the Old Testament rites pointed, of Himself on the Cross. Seeing their connexion, let us now consider each of these happenings in some more detail.

John's baptism, particularly of Jesus, has a significance both historical and analogical, and not simply because these are things that we have assigned to it. We are to see that Jesus' coming is going to completely transform and fulfill all that has come before by His participation in the lived Covenant given to Moses and developed by Israelite tradition.

Now, it can appear problematic that Jesus here presents himself for a baptism of repentance. We who profess the orthodox faith say of Him in the Nicene Creed: "God of God, Light of Light, Very God of very God". Consider that in the grand scheme of Christianity (particularly with regard to the Cross and Resurrection, without which everything else becomes meaningless), a fallible god in need of conversion and repentance is entirely laughable and useless. Thanks be to God, that is not the case. Thus we are not in any meaningful way similar to the present day devotees of a self-inflicted Mt. Olympus and the errant, fickle deities that

have been enthroned there by pathological fiat. Rather does Jesus come to confirm His own humanity and to reaffirm the message of John. What John had been preaching to those gathered about him was in fact perfectly consistent with both the Old Testament prophets and the newly inaugurated ministry of Jesus, to Whom all that had come before did indeed point and in Whom all would find perfect fulfillment. Herein is the glory of this first facet of the triple theophany recounted in the Gospels.

In the second instance which we celebrate today, the Transfiguration, there is no seeming paradox to contend with. The Divinity of Christ is displayed before the eyes of the chosen Apostles, who are absolutely dumbfounded. As the perfect humanity of Christ is established and confirmed in His baptism, so does the Father confirm for us on Mt. Tabor that He is pleased to throw the full weight of the Godhead in our direction, for our benefit. If ever there were any doubts in the minds of Peter, James and John, it has certainly been illustrated for them beyond the shadow of a doubt that “the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us and we beheld his glory.” The Gospels are showing us that yes, the two natures in the one person of Jesus Christ is in fact an authentic revelation, doctrine commended to the faithful as worthy of belief and entrusted to the care of the Church to preserve for all ages.

The other thing to note about the Transfiguration is the topic of conversation amongst Jesus, Moses and Elijah. In a sermon about this subject the Rev. John Mason Neale, the great 19<sup>th</sup> cent. Anglican priest and hymnographer, said: "And what did they talk of? If we had not been told, how different a conversation we should have imagined! We should perhaps have thought that they would speak of that kingdom which the LORD had come on earth to establish; that kingdom which shall never be destroyed, against which the gates of hell shall not prevail; that kingdom which shall be from sea to sea, and from the flood unto the world's end. Nothing less. 'They appeared in glory, and spake of His decease.' To talk of death in the height of this glory! To talk of a shameful death,--a death of agony,--amidst such brightness as the world had

never before seen! Yes: but the text does not end so. They 'spake of His decease which He should accomplish.' What a wonderful word! When do we speak thus? We say that a man accomplishes deliverance from death, but to accomplish death itself, who would thus talk? It tells us how freely, how earnestly, our LORD set about His Passion, according to that saying of His: 'I have a Baptism to be baptized with, and how am I straitened till it be accomplished.'... And that indeed was a glorious subject for a season of glory. This was a brighter and better vision than Moses had, when he gat him to the top of Pisgah, and beheld all the land which GOD had promised to His people. This was a nobler prospect than Elijah had, when the chariot was bearing him up above the clouds, and his mantle fell from off him." (John Mason Neale, *Sermon XV*, "The Three Tabernacles")

There are many facets of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ to fix our attention on. But no matter which you choose, they all lead to the passion, death and Resurrection. There is no getting around that, and that is a good thing. And so these instances of kerygmatic parallelism that we have noted in the Gospels are now brought to completion on Calvary by the centurion's statement: "Truly this was the son of God." (Mt. 27:54) The Evangelists have collated pregnant instances of both the perfect humanity and the perfect Divinity of Christ and now show us that the redemptive work of the Cross is as efficacious as it needed to be. The humanity of the Jesus who humbly submitted to St. John's baptism is offered on the Cross in a perfect sacrificial act of love. The Divinity of Christ exhibited on Mt. Tabor is able to offer the perfect sacrifice and to have it accepted on our behalf. This is both something that only humanity could do and that only God could do. Take away one of these two elements and the whole scheme of redemption loses its potency, the remainder becomes nothing more than an empty ritual, a cosmic farce performed not out of love and mercy, but merely out of disinterested condescension or, what's even worse, a sort of sanitised blood-lust and wrath. In the words of Fr. Stephen Freeman, a priest of the OCA: "For various reasons, some people are determined to make the economy of

salvation to be linked with the Wrath of God. If you do not repent, then God will do thus and such... I have always considered this representation of the gospel to be coercive and contrary to the love of God. I have heard convoluted ways in which this wrath is interpreted to be 'the loving thing to do' but I do not buy it....But it is essential in our witness to the God Who Is, to always relate the fact that He is a loving God, not willing that any should perish. He is not against us but for us. This is utterly essential to the correct proclamation of the Gospel." (from "Glory 2 God for all things", *God's Wrath*, Jan. 15, 2009)

There is one more thing to note. On this day some 72 years ago, the world was forever changed when, in the context of a state of war, a nuclear bomb was detonated over Hiroshima. And whatever side of the debate you find yourself on as to whether this was a justified, proportional response or no, the fact remains that such action could only be taken within a grievously broken world wherein remain unconverted men who, above all else, desire power. What, then, do we do with this? From an article last year in the magazine of the Orthodox Peace Fellowship, *In Communion*: "The Transfiguration is a promise to a broken world. A promise that all scars will be healed, all divisions overcome, all wars ended, and all souls restored. The Earth will no longer be a crucible of destruction, but the realm of the Kingdom. Atomic radiation will not shine forth from broken bodies, but the uncreated light from transfigured ones. Men will no longer aspire to harness the power of God, but will kneel before their king. There will no longer be cause to be afraid." (Nicholas Sooy, *In Communion*, Aug. 2016)

And so, as Jesus calls us each and every day to follow Him, we too can and must assume a portion of His threefold role as prophet by striving faithfully to live an authentic Christian life that will preach to others by our deeds and disposition, as priest by making offerings united to His of both praise and repentance, and as king by longing for the coming of His Kingdom which is indeed here among us as we are told by St. Mark: "...The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand..." (Mk. 1:15). And we know what our dignity both is and will be in

His Kingdom: "Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature." (2 Pet. 1:4) And then, when we come at last to our own particular death and judgment, our Father in heaven will be able to say of us, always on account of the work of His Son accomplished perfectly for us as we could never accomplish for ourselves: This is my beloved child in whom I am well pleased.