

The Transfiguration of Our Lord was recognized as a significant event by the disciples who were there. St. Peter, in our epistle lesson, references the transfiguration as evidence that the Gospel is no “cunningly devised fable”. The vision which they had on the mount was a presentation of God’s majesty and his glory. St. John, also refers to this event as proof of Christ’s divinity. In the first chapter of his gospel John writes, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.” This glory to which he bears witness is the glory of God which was manifested in Christ on the Mountain. For the Apostles which beheld it, this glory was unmistakable and proved Christ was Son of God, as He had claimed.

The other transfiguration which is recorded in scripture served a similar purpose. Moses, when he had gone up on the mountain to receive the law, spoke face to face with God. As a result of this encounter Moses’ face shone, “And when Aaron and all the children of Israel saw Moses, behold, the skin of his face shone; and they were afraid to come nigh him.” (Exodus 34:30) The physical appearance of Moses was altered because he had beheld the glory of God, almost as if his face was reflective. The glory of God which shone from Moses face frightened the people. It was not beheld with curiosity or attraction. It was unsettling to the people to look upon, and so Moses wore a veil whenever he spoke with the people. This glory, which God bestowed for a time upon Moses, proved Moses was truly speaking with God and speaking to the people the words of God. It was a testament to Moses’ piety and authority. None could question whether he was a true prophet presenting God’s law.

Moses was given a unique opportunity. When speaking of the death of Moses, the book of Deuteronomy records, “And there arose not a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face,” However, earlier in the book of Deuteronomy, The Lord promised that another prophet like Moses would come, “I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee, and will put my words in his mouth;” (Deuteronomy 18:18) This is the prophet for whom the people are waiting even in the New Testament. Early in John the Baptist’s ministry he was asked, “What then?.. Are you Elijah?” “I am not,” he said. “Are you the Prophet?” “No,” he answered.” (John 1:21) And later, John records, “When the people saw the sign He had

done, they said, “This really is the Prophet who was to come into the world!” (John 6:14) This “prophet” was the one who was to take up Moses’ ministry. One who spoke to God face to face, and who communicated to the people the words which God would give Him. Jesus said, “For I have not spoken on My own authority; but the Father who sent Me gave Me a command, what I should say and what I should speak. And I know that His command is everlasting life. Therefore, whatever I speak, just as the Father has told Me, so I speak.” (John 12:49-50) Our Lord claimed the position of Prophet for himself, and the Father confirmed it on the Mount Tabor.

The people who looked for the promised Prophet were also awaiting the return of Elijah. Elijah was seen as the greatest of the Old Testament prophets. He rebuked King Ahab and Jezebel, perhaps the most wicked rulers in Israelite history. The people saw themselves in a similar position under the Romans. They were oppressed by wicked and Pagan rulers who violated their religion and slew their prophets. The Jews hoped for a prophet like Elijah who would show God’s power upon the godless heathen rulers they endured. Elijah was given the power to cause a drought over the whole land. As St. James records, “Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit.” (James 5:17-18) Elijah was also the first Old Testament prophet to raise someone from the dead. Elijah himself was assumed into Heaven without dying. And finally, the Lord promised to send Elijah back to the people in the last verses of Malachi: “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord.” (Malachi 4:5) This is why the people ask John the Baptist if he is Elijah, and why throughout Jesus’ ministry he is presented with the same question. When Peter confesses Jesus as the Son of God and the Messiah, he notes that others believe that Jesus is Elijah.

At Jesus’ Transfiguration, He is proved to be greater than both of these great men who had come before Him. Jesus is flanked by the greatest prophets God had used in the growth of the people of God. However, when Peter offers to make three tabernacles, one for each of them, God the Father seems almost to respond to Peter’s implication that they are all three equal by announcing, “This is my beloved Son: hear him.” Jesus is greater

than Moses and Elijah. He was sent to accomplish what they could not. For Moses had delivered to the people the Law of God. God had made a covenant with Moses on behalf of the people to love and provide for them as they kept his commands. Moses had given the template which the people needed to follow in worship of God. Yet the people could not keep the commands. They strayed over and over again, so that the law was all but forgotten. Moses himself was barred from the promised land because he succumbed to the faithlessness of the people and disobeyed God.

Elijah called the people back to faithfulness in the midst of their wickedness. He rebuked and refuted the prophets of Baal and slew hundreds of them. He preserved the Lord's prophets from massacre at the hands of Jezebel. Elijah was acquainted with Solomon's prayer which was proclaimed in Jerusalem when the temple was dedicated about 75 years before his time. Solomon had prayed, "When the heavens are shut up and there is no rain because your people have sinned against you, and when they pray toward this place and confess your name and turn from their sin because you have afflicted them, then hear from heaven and forgive the sin of your servants, your people Israel. Teach them the right way to live, and send rain on the land you gave your people for an inheritance." (1 Kings 8:35-36) And so to draw the people back to God he prayed that God would bring a drought. All these things he did in order to draw the people back to the worship of their God.

Yet, neither Moses nor Elijah could make the people righteous. They fell away, breaking the covenant with God. And so God sends His Son. Jesus is greater than all those who came before, because he is able to accomplish what they could not. This, indeed, is what Moses and Elijah speak to Christ about. St. Luke records, "And, behold, there talked with him two men, which were Moses and Elias: who appeared in glory, and spake of his decease which he should accomplish at Jerusalem." The subject of their conversation was the Lord's death "which he should accomplish at Jerusalem." It seems so strange to speak of one's death being accomplished. Yet, in this case it is most fitting. For in the accomplishment of Christ's death, the work to which Moses and Elijah were dedicated will finally be completed. The reconciliation of the people of God will be made. The people will be made righteous by the death of the Messiah, and so Our Lord provides for us a more excellent sacrifice than either of these great prophets could ever offer. As the author of the book of Hebrews

writes, “And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise: God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect.”

We are recipients of the promised deliverance. We too will be glorified with Our Lord. The glory which shone from Moses’ face, and much more from Jesus’ face was the effect of communion with God. All those in Christ will receive this glory because we will see God. This is what Paul writes to the Corinthians, “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.” (1 Corinthians 13:12) and, “But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.” (2 Corinthians 3:18) In Paul’s description, to see God is to be changed. Moses was transfigured because he spoke to God “face-to-face”. We likewise will participate in God’s glory because we will be able to gaze upon Him. This is the fundamental idea of the doctrine of the Beatific Vision. In the Scriptures, to see God involves some deeper interaction with His nature. There is a participation which is implied. Something of this idea is preserved in the English words “behold” and “apprehend”. Both of these words, one coming from the German language the other from the Latin, mean “to see” but also “to take hold of”. When we are given the chance to behold the Lord – when we are given eyes to see – we will be indelibly changed.

It is no coincidence that the three disciples who were brought up to Mount Tabor on this occasion were also the three whom Christ brought to the Garden of Gethsemane. The agony and stark humanity of Our Lord which was exhibited on the night in which he was betrayed was balanced in their minds by the memory of His Transfiguration. They were prepared for His death, which he was to accomplish, by the Vision which they received of His glory. They had seen Him as God. They could never unsee it.

We now await the accomplishing of our hope, that we may be raised to Glory with Our Lord. It is for us to peer with the eyes of faith toward heaven. Let us not be content with the glories and pleasures which are proffered in this life and in this world. Our glory is to be of a different kind.

“Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.” (1 John 3:2)