

Feast of the Transfiguration 26 February 2017

[Exodus 24: 12-18; Psalm 99; 2 Peter 1: 16 -21](#) [Matthew 17:1-9](#) Vanderbilt Divinity Library

[Transfiguration - Last Epiphany A February 26, 2017](#) Textweek

The transfiguration is considered to be a miracle and a very unique miracle in that it happens to Jesus himself. Thomas Aquinas considered the Transfiguration "the greatest miracle" in that it complemented baptism and showed the perfection of life.

When we follow the gospel milestones that mark the life of Jesus there are six significant points that stand out and are marked with major feast days within the Church Calendar: Birth, Baptism, Transfiguration, Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Ascension.

The theological understanding of the transfiguration has drawn on the narrative itself and has also sought to connect that narrative with other biblical narratives.

It can be argued that this event, or account, is what the last of the prophets alludes to; in Malachi we hear "*Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. 6 He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse.*"

And so the appearance of Elijah in the Transfiguration story is linked to Malachi's prophecy.

Origen, one of the early Church fathers, commenting on the instruction to the apostles to keep silent about what they had seen until the Resurrection, suggested a link between the 'glorified' states of the Transfiguration and the Resurrection, and suggests these two events are related in some way.

And today we had the first reading from Exodus, and another mountain top event, so perhaps the transfiguration is also related to the giving of the Ten Commandments. And whilst we are on Exodus if we read the account of the Transfiguration in Luke's gospel we hear that when the prophets Elijah and Moses appear, Jesus begins to talk to them; and Luke states that they spoke of Jesus' *exodus* (εξοδον) which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem: "*They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.*" [Luke 9:31]

Today we might look again at the Transfiguration to see for ourselves what this obviously important narrative seeks to illuminate for us.

And we should begin with an appreciation that this is not an event that is being documented, and for the record; the figure of Moses may or may not be an actual historical person, most likely most of what is written about or attributed to Moses, like the Transfiguration narrative, is a text created to illuminate and enlighten rather than to create an historical record.

Having two mountain top stories today, gives us an opportunity to appreciate the setting for the narratives. And obviously in more primitive times, when God was

thought to reside in heaven, and heaven was thought to be in the sky, the top of a mountain represented the reality of being closer to God.

In both the Exodus reading and the gospel reading the mountain top is the meeting place of Divinity and humanity, an encounter between the temporal and the eternal.

And in both cases the stories mark evolutionary movements in the journey of Humanity.

Exodus speaks of the giving and acceptance of law, the governing rules and moral codes that give shape to society, a movement from primitive tribal and nomadic wandering to an ordered society that could build and sustain community.

Quite rightly this lifted humanity above its previous everyday experience and from the mountain top humanity is given a much fuller and wider perspective, we are given a view that goes beyond the horizon we had before we climbed the mountain.

"The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. 17 Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. 18 Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights."

If these words had been written by Shakespeare, T.S. Elliot, or Lady Gaga, we would readily appreciate an understanding of the "Cloud of Unknowing" that we have to enter in order to find enlightenment, and the devouring fire would again be seen as the burning off of all that is past, a refining fire that would enable new life to emerge; and for the traditionalists, and those who are slow to apprehend this new language, a reference to "forty days and forty nights" brings to mind the flood narrative and so we again can see this is a story of re-creation, a new beginning, and a new order of enlightenment for all.

Rather than a biblical event, this is a writing that sheds light on the very movement of humanity from its early formation toward a more enlightened community, and so also a movement toward the Divine nature that is our fullest realisation.

And so what new era is being heralded by the gospel mountain top narrative?

It is significant that the witnesses to the transfiguration are named as Peter, James and John for in Mark's gospel, which the writer of Matthew draws on, Peter, James and John were the only witnesses of the raising of the Daughter of Jairus [Mark 5:37]

Perhaps Origen was on to something when he saw a link with this story and the resurrection.

Certainly we're looking at another encounter between humanity and Divinity, for we are again on top of a mountain, and in today's narrative it is Jesus that is standing in the position that previously we found Moses standing in, so here we have another prophetic encounter to illuminate what Jesus was really all about, just as the previous story told us what Moses was really all about.

The appearance of Moses and Elijah has a significance, just as the placing of the select disciples has a significance; and in the tradition this story was crafted for, Moses represents the law, as we saw in the Exodus story, and Elijah as well as representing the prophets, also represents one who was taken up to heaven rather than dying.

So, are we being shown a new movement here, and a new enlightenment that takes us beyond the law; and one that also validates the eternal nature and the real nature of the living word that is made real in the prophetic utterance?

Earlier in his gospel Matthew writes in the voice of Jesus: *"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil."* [Matthew 5:17]

We are being shown a new reality, one that leaves behind the law and the prophets and that moves into a place of fulfilment.

The Divine dialogue that is found in the narrative echoes the same words that accompany Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist; in today's text we have:

"While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"

And the baptism story has the line: *"And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."* [Mark 1:11]

Perhaps what is so often overlooked is the difference in these quotes, for in today's text we have *"listen to him"* added to the declaration of the beloved Son.

The closer we listen to this milestone in the teaching of Jesus the more there is to discover, here we find a new view from the mountain top, one that points us toward a life lived in the reality of resurrection. It speaks of a life lived beyond the confines of mortality.

The first reading gave a view of a significant movement in our evolution; a movement into an ordered community, a life lived not in tribal isolation but with principles and laws that would be creative of a common humanity.

Now we have a further evolution that takes us into the reality of eternity.

When we explore the mystical teachings of Jesus, and not the simplistic superman account of someone special, we do actually encounter surprising insights.

Jesus somehow knew what quantum physicists are still unravelling; quantum theory allows for particles to be in two states at the same time and asserts that we do not know what the state of any object is, it is actually in all possible states simultaneously, until such time as we look, we attend to it, and then it fully becomes what it is.

Human and Divine, Temporal and eternal, Jesus invites us to listen to a new reality, if we look toward death then that will be our reality, or we can leave behind that understanding and seek life.

The second reading from Peter speaks of our transfiguration: So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. *"You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts."*