

FROM GLORY TO GLORY: Celebrating Transfiguration Sunday

Transfiguration Sunday is the final and climactic Sunday in the Epiphany season. Because the Epiphany season itself is the culmination of the Advent and Christmas seasons, Transfiguration Sunday is really the culmination of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany. On Transfiguration Sunday, we celebrate Jesus' transfiguration (literally, his metamorphosis) on the mountain, where Peter, John, and James watched in amazement as the radiant Jesus spoke with the glorified Moses and Elijah (Mt 17.1-6, Mk 9.1-8, Lk 9.28-36).

During Epiphany season, we commemorate the various "epiphanies" (i.e., manifestations) of Jesus' Sonship and Kingship. In particular, we remember the Magi's visit, Jesus' first miracle at Cana, Jesus' baptism, and Jesus' transfiguration; Christ's transfiguration on the mountain is the crowning "epiphany" of the season. Indeed, Jesus' identity as Son of God is revealed unmistakably when the Father physically glorifies Jesus and then announces, "This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!" (Lk 9.35). And so as we commemorate the glory and brilliance of our transfigured Lord, we are compelled to identify him as "Son of God ... Light of Light, Very God of Very God" (Nicene Creed).

One of the other epiphanies that we celebrate during the Epiphany season is the Baptism of Jesus, which has a salient parallel to the Transfiguration of Jesus: At Jesus' baptism, the Father declares, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased!" (Lk 3.22), while at Jesus' transfiguration, the Father likewise declares, "This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!" (Lk 9.35). In each of these epiphanies, the Father explicitly identifies Jesus as the messianic "chosen servant" of Isaiah 42 (who is also the "suffering servant" of Isaiah 53).

As we compare these two epiphanies, we see that the glory of Jesus' baptism gives way to the glory of his transfiguration. That which we heard and saw wondrously in Jesus' baptism, we now hear and see even more gloriously in Jesus' transfiguration: that Jesus truly is the Son of God. But as Jesus moves from glory to glory, ironically he is also moving closer to his crucifixion, his "exodus" (Lk 9.31). Jesus' true glory will come through suffering and death – which is to say, Jesus is headed toward his resurrection, the true epiphany of epiphanies, which will demonstrate once and for all that he is the true Son of God.

Transfiguration Sunday, then, in addition to being the consummation of the Epiphany season, points forward both to Good Friday and to Easter, to the fullness of Jesus' "exodus." It also points to the glory beyond the resurrection – to Jesus' ascension, to his coming in glory in AD 70 to vindicate his people, and ultimately to his unimaginably glorious return at the last day – but the literary parallels between Jesus' transfiguration story and his resurrection story are most notable: both have two shining men (on a mountain and in a tomb), as well as fearful observers, in addition to a glorified Jesus.

Though the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church, and the Anglican Communion observe the Feast of the Transfiguration on August 6th in their liturgical calendars, it is certainly fitting to observe Jesus' transfiguration, as do most liturgical Protestant churches, in culmination of Epiphany (a festive season focusing on Jesus' glorious Messiahship and Sonship) and in anticipation of Lent (a somber season focusing on Jesus' cruciform suffering and death).

It is significant that, in all three synoptic Gospels, the transfiguration passages come immediately after Jesus predicts his own death and resurrection to his disciples and commands them to take up their own crosses. Cross-bearing always comes before real glory. Luke tells us that the very subject of Jesus' conversation with Moses and Elijah was his upcoming death, literally, his "exodus that he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem" (Lk 9.31). No doubt the emphasis of Transfiguration Sunday is Christ's glory. But Jesus' radiant transfiguration glory is only a glimpse of his resurrection glory. Even as Jesus' baptism gave way to the glory of the transfiguration, so also the transfiguration gives glory to his resurrection. Now, though, we begin to see

that real glory comes on the other side of suffering, after a walk on the Via Dolorosa.

Transfiguration Sunday is a "pre-Lent" celebration, a pointer to the darkness of Good Friday and the glory of Easter Sunday. And so it is a reminder of the cruciform beginnings of true glory. As you behold the glory of the transfigured Lord, who moved from glory to glory (to glory) by way of suffering, resolve to put away your sin and to take up your cross, being transformed into His resurrection image from glory to glory (2 Cor 3.18).