

Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, led them up on a high mountain by themselves, and He was transfigured before them. [Matthew 17.1-2a;

NKJV]

## I.

The Transfiguration of our Lord is recorded in the Gospel accounts of St. Matthew, St. Mark, and St. Luke, and testified to in St. John's 1<sup>st</sup> Epistle and the account John by Christ in Revelation, and also by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Epistle of St. Peter. In each case, the Transfiguration is treated as the point in our Lord's life where He begins His final trip to Jerusalem, and to the holy cross.

The Transfiguration is a revelation of Jesus' divine nature. As Jesus is praying on the mountain, with Peter, James, and John present, but apparently sleeping, His countenance and His clothing begin to glow. It is a momentary transition from the concealment of His divine glory that marked His days on earth to the manifestation of glory that will be revealed when He returns again. The bright light that shines as His faced is changed and His clothing glimmers is the glory that is truly His as God the Son, begotten of the Father from eternity. Thus, the Transfiguration of our Lord proclaims to you that this Man, Jesus, is your God.

Moreover, the Transfiguration

of our Lord proclaims to you the purpose of Christ. The three disciples with Jesus not only see Jesus transfigured, but they also see the Old Testament figures, Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus about His forthcoming death, resurrection, and ascension. Here, in visual and dramatic form, the disciples are shown that the Law and the Prophets of the Scriptures witness to Jesus and are superseded by Jesus as the ultimate Word of God. They are shown that the Scriptures of the Old Testament are about Christ, from start to finish, and that He is the fulfillment of the Scriptures. Luke's Gospel account gives us the Greek term "exodus" to describe Christ's work on the cross, His resurrection, and His ascension. The Old Testament Exodus, in which God redeems His people from slavery and leads them to the promised land, is the shadow of the Exodus that Christ will accomplish in His death and resurrection, as He will lead God's people from the slavery to sin into the freedom of everlasting life. Thus, the Transfiguration of our Lord not only proclaims the true identity of Christ, that this Man, Jesus, is your God; it also proclaims His sacred purpose to save lost sinners on the cross.

The Transfiguration shows the person and purpose of Christ, but it also shows the nature of true faith. The nature of true faith is not shown by the disciples' words but by God's own Word. The disciples show what often passes for faith, but is not. God's Word declares the nature of faith. Let's see how this is so.

## II.

Here's what we see in Peter, James, and John, as the Transfiguration occurs. First, as Luke records, the disciples are sleeping while Jesus is praying. This brings to mind a similar pattern while Jesus is praying in the Garden of Gethsemene. In both cases, the disciples display a sad unawareness of the glory of God which is hidden in the Man Jesus and His holy mission.

But, you see more here than just tired disciples. You see the limits of sinful mankind when it comes to the things of God. It is not a question of whether you, were you in their place on the mountain and in the garden, would have been more alert. Rather, it is the case that what you see outwardly in Peter, James, and John, is but a visible testimony to what is hidden inwardly in the soul of every sinner. Apart from the gift of

faith, every sinner lives in a sad unawareness of the true nature and purpose of Christ. To this very day, people conjure up all sorts of notions of who God is, who Christ is, and what Christianity is, but apart from the gift of faith, their ideas are equally wrong, equally self-centered, and equally dead to the truth that is in Christ Jesus.

Once the three disciples are fully awake, looking at the transfigured Jesus and the images of Moses and Elijah, things get no better. Peter suggests that this would be a great place to stay indefinitely. He proposes a celebration of the Old Testament Festival of Tabernacles, in which the Hebrews lives in tents, or booths, or tabernacles, for a week. Here, Peter has different focus. It appears that he wishes to capture and prolong the glory, so as to avoid the suffering of which Jesus has lately been speaking.

Again, Peter and his fellow disciples have failed to perceive what it is that they are seeing before their very eyes. The pitching of tents will not do. Postponing their departure from this event is not what God has in mind in this revelation. And so, a bright cloud surrounds them, and the voice of God the Father is heard from the cloud: "This is My

**beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!” And thus the Father puts to rest the human thoughts and desires that these three experienced in reaction to the miracle before their eyes.**

**Faced with this divine interruption to their proposal, the disciples respond with fear. They fall face down to the ground. And there they stay, until the cloud, the voice, and the images of Moses and Elijah are gone, and they look up to see Jesus only. Jesus only is the point of this miracle, not their proposals, not their religious experience. This is the true nature of faith: to hear the Word of God and by it to see, and cling to, Jesus only.**

### **III.**

**Of course, St. Peter comes to understand the Transfiguration in its correct light, as we hear in words of the Epistle for today. His original idea is replaced with the truth. His original idea was that the important thing about religious experience is “Jesus with me.” That’s why he proposed pitching tents. But his original idea was wrong. The important thing for you about religious experience is not “Jesus with me,” but rather “Jesus for me!” Thus it is that He says, “you do well” to heed the true**

**meaning of this great event in Jesus’ life: “Which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.” The dark place is the sinful condition that plagues us all. Out of it no good thing comes. By it, all religious proposals are defective, and all religious experience is deceitful. In this condition, only one thing works for good and for God: To be a hearer of God’s Word; to realize that the Word of God in Christ Jesus comes to you as a light coming into a dark place. There, that light of the Gospel brings a new dawn, a new rising of the morning star, and true faith comes alive within you. The true and proper focus of religious experience is Jesus only. When this Gospel light shines in the dark place, faith comes to life.**

**In our day, the blind proposal of St. Peter, to focus on religious experience itself, runs rampant not only among non-Christians, who cannot know better, but also among Christians and within churches that should know better. But, as St. John declares, they love darkness rather than the light! People today are trained by our supposedly Christian culture to turn to the church for an ongoing Transfiguration**

experience. They wish to find what the three disciples experienced, and they wish to do with it what Peter proposed: To pitch their tents wherever the self-oriented religious experience is seen, heard, and felt, and to prolong it as long as possible. And the church, sad to say, buys into this notion, and promises to deliver the desired religious experiences, just so that their congregations can grow, the budget can be met, and the signs of success can be seen. Christ for me is replaced by notions of Christ with me. And what is then lost is Jesus only!

Brothers and sisters of our Lord Jesus Christ, this ought not to be! The very Transfiguration event on the mountain testifies against it! God calls you to gather around His Word and Sacraments. That's why you are here. And His purpose in this gathering is not to entertain you with religious experiences. His purpose in this gathering is to raise your eyes to hear and see Jesus only. God wants you to come here to the services of God's house so that you might repent of the infatuation with the

dark places, and that you look instead to Jesus only.

Christ ends the experience of the Transfiguration for the disciples by instructing them: "Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man is risen from the dead." Only then, in the light of the cross and resurrection, can one "get it" about the Transfiguration: only then seeing the meaning of seeing Jesus only.

You, my brothers and sisters in Christ, are on the other side of the cross and resurrection. You have the Gospel in all its clarity. You can see that the experience of the Transfiguration is about looking only to Jesus, the author and finisher of your faith. It is not a matter of Christ with me, though He comes to you in every service of God's house. It is a matter of Christ for me! I am saved by Christ for me. I am forgiven by Christ for me. I am protected by Christ for me. I am a child of God by Christ for me. And I am a citizen of heaven, now and forever, by Christ for me! Here is the application of the Transfiguration for your life: Look to Jesus only, because there you have Christ for you!