

Sunday 4th August 2024 – ‘The Transfiguration of our Lord’

Introduction

The transfiguration of Jesus has been seen as an example of hagiography, a word coming from the Greek 'hagios' (sacred/holy) and 'graphes' (writing). Such writing and paintings carry the *meaning* of a person's life, or an event, but embellish it with symbolism of a miraculous nature. Accounts of incidents in the lives of Moses and Elijah have also been seen as hagiographic. However, both Moses and Elijah had mountaintop encounters with God. Those encounters were theophanies (theo/god, phaneia/manifestation or appearance), since God was experienced through human senses.

In witnessing the transfiguration of Jesus, all three of his chosen disciples, Peter, James, and John experienced a theophany at the same time and at a turning point in time. Perhaps the narrative of the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain is another example of hagiography, then again, perhaps it is more. Perhaps it is an example of something greater, purer, more powerful than meaning alone: Truth.

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Daniel 7:9-10, Ps. 97; 2 Peter 1:16-19; Mark 9:2-1

by

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Introduction

Every day we get news of the athletes competing in the Paris Olympics. Naturally, we particularly tune in when an Australian wins a gold, silver, or bronze medal. If he or she is a South Australian, well, our hearts swell with pride. We're keenly aware of the self-discipline required to reach such heights of achievement. One of us yet, for most of us mere mortals, godlike in physical and mental prowess.

The gods of many ancient peoples were imagined as living on mountain heights where earth and heaven appear to meet and there is no sound of human activity. It was to such a mountain, away from the crowds who followed him, that Jesus led the disciples he had chosen, Peter, John, and James. On the mountain, something happened that blew their minds.

The transfiguration of Jesus is unlike whatever 'truth' could be found in, for example, the stories told of the gods of Greece and Rome. Those myths evolved out of a human desire to explain and understand certain phenomena in the natural world and the world of human relationships. Much like the gods of the ideologies and pseudo-religions of our own day which have arisen to fill the vacuum left by a rejection of a transcendent God.

Incomprehensible at the time, Peter, John and James, later looked back at what they had seen and heard in the light of all that happened afterwards. Then they realised that what they had witnessed was unique in all known history. It was also a preview of the Truth that would be fully revealed and consummated at the end of time and the final judgement. As Daniel, an exile in Babylon, foresaw in ‘a dream and visions of his head as he lay in bed’ (Daniel 7:1b): ‘A court sat in judgement, and the books were opened’ (Daniel 7:10d).

2 Peter 1:16-21

In his second letter, Peter reminded his readers in the Early Church that their faith in Jesus the Christ was based on eyewitness accounts. He and Jesus' other disciples had had actual experiences and interactions with a real human being. The accounts were true and not tales contrived to convey a truth, moral or otherwise. Peter was guarding his readers from being led

astray so that they would in time, come to know what is the height, and length, and breadth of the love of God.

Mark 9:2-10

In a judicial court-like scene, the transfigured Jesus stood and talked with Moses, representing the Law and its writings, and Elijah, representing the prophets and their writings.

It is significant that there are three heavenly persons (Jesus, Moses, and Elijah) and three earthly persons (Peter, John, and James). In Israel's law, plaintiff and defendant each needed two witnesses to testify on their behalf. So that, we have Moses and Elijah testifying by their presence together that the human Jesus is both lawgiver and prophet. Jesus, himself, witnesses that the Old Covenant law and prophets still hold, while as Son of God and humankind, he transcends them. His presence in the world is a sign of something new occurring. It's not new in the sense of a discrete event cut off or separate from all that had gone before him in Israel's life and faith-history, but as part of that life and history. A new chapter, if you like, of God's relationship with Israel and humankind was beginning.

Six days before ascending the mountain, Jesus had told a crowd and his disciples: "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the Kingdom of God has come in power." On that seventh day, sign of a sabbath rest before a new beginning, Jesus was transfigured by light emanating from within, and his glory seen by Peter, James, and John.

Second, between Peter, James, and John there was also the relationship of witnesses. Peter has James and John to witness to the truth of his testimony when later he recounts what he has seen and heard. Similarly, James and John have Peter and each other. In their unity, they would later form the infant church and establish early Christianity.

At the time, however, the disciples were terrified and Peter, in his confusion and incomprehension, blurted out to Jesus "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings or tents, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." The cloud that then overshadowed them was a manifestation of the presence of God the Father, known as Shekinah. Peter, James, and John heard God's voice from the cloud testifying with the declaration that Jesus is Son of God, the Beloved. The beloved Son does the will of his Father and has authority to speak for him. Then came God's command: "Listen to him!"

Conclusion.

God's judgement was given. Jesus is the Truth. He is Son of God. The transfiguring light seen by Peter, James, and John was not a reflection of any other light but shone from Jesus, lighting up his clothes. When the disciples looked around after being dazzled by the bright light shining from him, they saw only Jesus. He is son of Mary. He is one of us yet shows us what we shall become when we listen to him and follow his way doing justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly with our God.

