



The Transfiguration

1. What event was 6 – or 8 days before the Transfiguration?
2. Why only Peter, James and John?
3. Why Moses and Elijah?
4. Why did God spoke to the 3 disciples at this time?
5. Why did Jesus instruct them not to talk about what had happened?

We refer to the incident where the disciples Peter, James and John seeing a dazzling Jesus in the company of Moses and Elijah on a mountain as the Transfiguration.

Why is the Transfiguration such a momentous event that is commemorated every year in the Church calendar? Why is it such a big deal? I mean some people even deny it happened because we in the 21st century find it difficult to swallow supernatural events. Transfiguration is what they study under Professor McGonagall at the School of Hogwarts and for a short time as we read the books or watch the films we suspend disbelief! But to suspend disbelief for a long time, well...

The Greek Orthodox Church uses the word metamorphosis instead of Transfiguration. Meaning a change of physical form, structure, or substance especially by supernatural means. Our world does know of metamorphosis like a caterpillar to a butterfly or carbon into a diamond. Yes we may have trouble swallowing this particular transfiguration but I find it credible because Matthew, Mark and Luke specifically refer to the transfiguration and whilst they add different details the essentials are the same. The passage Robyn just read us from 1 Peter also specifically refers to the Transfiguration. One may wonder why John does not, but I believe he indirectly refers to this monumental event as well as others of supernatural occurrence when he writes in Chapter 1, verse 14:

"We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. "

Thus I believe the transfiguration is very likely a real experience or a vision equally experienced by 3 men and at the same time.

But what is so important about this? After I compared the gospel accounts of the Transfiguration I formed a number of crucial questions.

- 1) What event was 6 – or 8 days ago? It seems that the Gospel writers want the reader to link what happened before to the transfiguration event. So we'll later pursue this.

2) Why only Peter, James and John? What about the other 9 disciples? Was it because the 3 had recently showed how ignorant they were of Jesus' final ministry on earth. Peter was told "To get behind me Satan" and was even straight after The Transfiguration trying to establish an earthly home for the three transfigured. James and John got an earful when the other disciples found James and John Zebedee wanted to sit on either side of Jesus's throne. Jesus said they just didn't understand what they were asking. But I doubt the other disciples understood Christ's earthly ministry. Certainly Judas didn't.

Or was it because of their future great leadership roles? James was the first apostle martyred. Peter was The Rock and John, well his history is rather more unclear.

I have very limited mind reading skills and of God's mind even less but it is certainly worth pondering. Does it help us accept that some Christians will have more prominent roles than others? That some will be more in the know than others? It might be also noted that these 3 disciples were taken aside with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane and also were the three taken aside by Jesus to witness the raising from the dead of Jairus' daughter. They seem to have comprised the nucleus or inner core of the disciples. And yet they were humble fishermen. Does that say something to us of how Christ values hardworking people of humble background?

3) Why Moses and Elijah? These historical figures were very important to the Jewish faith. Moses was known as the law giver, and God addressed the people of Israel through Elijah who recalled the Israelites from their disobedience and challenged them to recommit to the covenant that God had established with them.

4) Why did God spoke to the 3 disciples at this time?

5) Why did Jesus instruct them not to talk about what had happened –to keep silent? This question is easiest answered. Obviously it wasn't the right time to reveal this. Can you imagine what both the Roman rulers and the Jewish authorities would do, if this story got about early in Christ's public ministry? And not only to Jesus!

Let's go back to the first question? What happened 6-8 days ago? Context is nearly always important.

Matthew 16, the preceding chapter to our first reading, gives us an answer. The Pharisees and Sadducees, the religious leaders, had come to Jesus demanding a sign proving He had come from heaven. But Jesus refused to indulge the religious leaders. As He explained to them, there had been plenty of signs indicating who He was. He had cast out unclean spirits, healed the sick, and taught with authority. Yet, they couldn't recognize His sovereignty because they refused to.

Later, Jesus asks of his disciples who he was. "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." Peter's answer: – "You are the Messiah." However when Jesus starts preparing his followers for his

approaching death, Peter rejects this idea and it is at this time Jesus says, "Get behind me Satan."

So the transfiguration appears to be a very unique, dramatic and audio/visual answer to the earlier discussion about who Christ is AND of his imminent death. Fascinating to think that before cameras and movies were possibly even thought of, God provided this dramatic teaching tool!

So now we see Jesus is in the company of Moses and Elijah and one might initially think they are on the same level.

But then God speaks within a bright cloud to the three disciples. Jesus is called "Son" by the voice of God the Father. But more importantly "Listen to him" – Jesus. Moses and Elijah appear but God's voice clearly distinguishes Jesus from them! He is given unique status and authority.

Keep in mind that Moses is regarded as the lawgiver and Elijah the first of the great prophets, whose task was to set the standards for the entire community. Is the presence of Moses and Elijah symbolic? That Jesus is a new and greater expression of the law and the prophets. I do not think we can doubt that this is the purpose of how Moses and Elijah is presented. Jesus often referred to the law and the prophets but in Matt 5:17 he said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." A remarkable claim of absolute perfection that is dramatically illustrated in The Transfiguration.

Did Peter, John and James immediately understand? No. Mark tells us the three discussed amongst themselves what "rising from the dead meant." We must not forget this aspect of The Transfiguration. So too, we must discuss amongst ourselves the meaning of puzzling Scripture.

And we are right to commemorate each year The Transfiguration. It reminds us that Jesus, whilst just a Man, was not. He was the Son of God and we must listen to Him. Above all voices.

Amen.