

The Transfiguration Luke 9:28-36

When we read the New Testament we meet a problem: we can never come to the story of the life of Jesus in the same way as those who actually met him. We have been told before we begin, “Jesus is the Son of God”, and that colours our thinking. The disciples didn’t look on Jesus in that way. It never even remotely occurred to them that Jesus was anything but another man like themselves. He was a remarkable man, maybe, that is why they were willing to travel with him and learn from him, but he was a man.

We have the opposite problem; because we begin by being told that Jesus is God, it is difficult for us to believe that he was really a man: but he was! It is true that before he became a man he was eternally part of the Godhead and, therefore, in his essential being he could never cease to be God. But when he became man he took a human body and had only a human brain. He had no intrinsic power of his own to work miracles; that power was the power of the Holy Spirit, and Jesus performed no miracle until he had been filled with the Holy Spirit at his baptism by John the Baptist in the river Jordan. We need to understand that Jesus in his earthly ministry had no advantage that we do not have except one - he was without sin. Supernatural knowledge, supernatural power, were attributes he laid aside when he became man, he was dependent upon the revelation given to him by the Holy Spirit. What is more, that supernatural knowledge and power are now available to us also through the filling of the same Holy Spirit and, I believe that if only we were as dedicated to the love and work of our heavenly Father as Jesus was, we would see the same miracles in the same abundance working through us as he saw working through him.

So his deity, although he could never abandon it because that was his essential being, was hidden. In the words of the Christmas Carol - "Veiled in flesh the Godhead see."

Today the Church celebrates the Feast of the Transfiguration, when we remember, as we heard in that passage from St Luke's Gospel, how Jesus went up a mountain and there his appearance was dramatically changed. I am not sure that this is strictly a sermon; rather I want to share with you some thoughts about the Transfiguration and leave it to you to draw from them what you will.

First, it is clear that within the fellowship of the 12 disciples, Jesus had an inner group of three, Peter, James and John, who were especially close to him. When he raised Jairus's daughter from the dead it was just these three he took with him into the room where she lay: on the night of his arrest when he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, he told most of the disciples to wait at a distance but he took Peter, James and John a little further and then told them to wait while he went on alone to pray: and here it is the same three he takes with him up the mountain. I think this illustrates something of the full humanity of Jesus - he desired fellowship and support and apparently these three in particular were able to give it to him.

Luke tells us that he went up the mountain to pray. Although we are not told what it was specifically that Jesus wanted to pray about it is reasonably certain that it was about the ordeal of the cross which faced him. Just six verses before this account of the Transfiguration, Luke has recorded the incident I mentioned a moment ago when Jesus asks who the disciples believe he is and Peter suddenly sees it and says, "You are the Christ of God." Immediately Jesus explains to them that that is correct but the Christ or Messiah (the words are the same, one is the Greek and the other the Aramaic) is not to be what they are expecting, rather

he will be taken captive and killed. That thought was obviously dominant in his mind and he felt the need to pray it through; and it was so terrible that he didn't just pray where he was; he wanted to get away and so he took these three up a mountain. It was as he prayed that the change in him occurred. The ordeal ahead of him was so terrible and his prayer was so intense, that it seems his communion with his Father was so real that his essential nature - his deity - rose to the surface and shone through. His Godhead which was veiled in flesh, pierced through that veil as a bright and shining light.

You will remember that when Moses went into the tent or Tabernacle of God to meet with him, when he came out his face was shining so brightly that he had to cover it with a veil. But this experience is not confined to Biblical characters. Do you remember the evangelist (I cannot recall his name) who some years ago walked through different countries bearing a large cross? Of course, it aroused much interest and enabled him to get into conversation with many who asked what he was doing it for, and he led several to Christ in that way. I remember reading how one night he went out and met with the Lord in a very deep way and when he returned to his home his wife told him his face was giving off what she could only describe as a light, although he was unaware of it.

It is when we are in prayer that God can reach into us and draw our spirit to himself. You know, we do not spend enough time in prayer - or I don't, I cannot speak for you. Perhaps we need to find our own mountains a little more often where we will not be disturbed by all the daily cares we face, and spend time with God. Anyway, it was in the intensity of his prayer that the deity of Jesus shone through his humanity.

Then there is a strange incident; two men suddenly appear alongside him, Moses and Elijah, also clothed in glorious

splendour. Although both Matthew and Mark also record this event, it is only Luke who tells us what they were talking about - he calls it his 'exodus' - a strange word to use. In other words, his departure from this life by way of the cross. This is another reason why I believe it was the thought of his passion which had driven Jesus to such intense prayer at this particular time.

Here, let me share something as an aside; but one which has always intrigued me. Jesus was the first to rise from the dead; it was his resurrection which has paved the way, made it possible, for us to be raised also. If that is so (and I believe that it is a crucial doctrine because if mankind could be raised from death without the prior death and resurrection of Jesus, then he didn't need to go through all that for us - we could be raised anyway) so, if it is true that Jesus had to rise first, how could it be that Elijah and Moses appeared then?

Now here is the fascinating situation. Elijah had never died. If you remember he had been taken up into heaven and Elisha, his successor, saw him go. So if Elijah had never died he did not need to be raised from the dead. All right, but what about Moses - we know that he did die; he died having seen the promised land but without ever entering it. However, there is something very strange about his death listen:-

And Moses the servant of the LORD died there in Moab, as the LORD had said. He buried him in Moab, in the valley opposite Beth Peor, but to this day no one knows where his grave is. [Deu 34:5-6]

Did you notice what it says? It says, God buried Moses. Some modern translations (not all because that was the NIV) simply say that Moses was buried, but the text actually says that he, God, buried Moses. Now I have no idea what that means, but obviously there is something unusual here. Let's put that alongside another very strange statement, this time from the New

Testament in the Letter of Jude. We don't read that letter very often do we? but listen to this:

But even the archangel Michael, when he was disputing with the devil about the body of Moses, did not dare to bring a slanderous accusation against him, but said, "The Lord rebuke you!" [Jude 1:9]

I must give you a little of the background to that. Jude is writing to warn a group of Christians about some false teachers who are spreading heretical doctrines. He says that they are godless men who are so arrogant that they slander those who teach the truth, having no respect for authority. But, says Jude, think how the angels behave. There is an order of hierarchy amongst them which they observe. Each nation has its guardian angel; with regard to the Jews, they are God's own people so they have an archangel named Michael. But Satan, the devil (also called Lucifer, which means light) was the guardian angel of the whole world and so he is senior even to Michael. Even though the devil has rebelled and opposes God, Michael would not himself bring a slanderous accusation against him because of his seniority but said, "The Lord rebuke you!" Jude's argument is that if Michael respects the devil's authority, even though he has rebelled, how much more ought these godless men to respect the authority of the recognised teachers of the truth.

So that is the background; but did you notice what it was that the devil and Michael were arguing about? Jude says it was the body of Moses. Now don't ask me how Jude knows that, but it is clearly there in Scripture. The devil and archangel Michael were in dispute over the body of Moses. It seems reasonable to assume that the devil was making claim to it - in which case, of course, Moses would have had to wait for the resurrection of Jesus before he could be raised, but apparently Michael says that the body of Moses belongs to the Lord. If you take that in conjunction with the statement in Deuteronomy that God buried Moses, you have

some very strange and special situation with regard to Moses which is unique and, in some way, explains why Moses could appear alongside Elijah who hadn't died at all.

Well, there you are; I told you that was an aside and I am certainly not building any doctrine on it. But isn't it interesting that something written way back at the beginning of the Old Testament in Deuteronomy should correlate so well with something written towards the end of the New Testament in Jude - even if we have to admit we do not really understand what those two statements mean.

Let me close with one other observation. Matthew, Mark and Luke all record the Transfiguration but John doesn't. Why does he omit something which is so interesting and so significant in our understanding of who Jesus is? especially as we know he was one of the three disciples who was there and actually saw it! Well, of course, we cannot be certain but let me give you my own opinion and you decide whether or not you agree.

John wrote his Gospel so that we would believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and that by believing we might have life in his name. In fact he states that this was his reason for writing it. If he had recorded the details of the Transfiguration there was the danger that we might think that that was just one extra special occasion when Jesus revealed his deity. But John wants us to see that in everything that he did and said Jesus was revealing God. In the words of Jesus himself:

Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. [John 14:9]

Let us who believe in God have the courage to admit that we do not really know who he is, what he is like. He is infinitely beyond our understanding. Nevertheless we can know him, and we can know that we know him. That is because of Jesus; he has revealed him. We cannot know what God is like in himself but

we can know what he looks like in the terms of a human being.
This, to me is the truth that lies in the transfiguration:
Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. [John 14:9]