

The Church of the Transfiguration

Prior to the Transfiguration:

²⁴ Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. ²⁶ For what will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life? Or what shall a man give in return for his life? ²⁷ For the Son of man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay every man for what he has done. ²⁸ Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom.” (Matt 16:24-28)



The Transfiguration



And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain apart. ² And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as light. ³ And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Eli'jah, talking with him. ⁴ And Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is well that we are here; if you wish, I will make three booths here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Eli'jah.” ⁵ He was still speaking, when lo, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.” ⁶ When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces, and were filled with awe. ⁷ But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Rise, and have no fear.” ⁸ And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.

⁹ And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, “Tell no one the vision, until the Son of man is raised from the dead.” ¹⁰ And the disciples asked him, “Then why do the scribes say that first Eli’jah must come?” ¹¹ He replied, “Eli’jah does come, and he is to restore all things; ¹² but I tell you that Eli’jah has already come, and they did not know him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of man will suffer at their hands.” ¹³ Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist...(Matt 17:1-13)

The Church of the Transfiguration

There is debate among scholars as to whether or not Mount Tabor, the traditionally accepted site of the Transfiguration, as the actual location in which Jesus appeared with Moses and Elijah. The Gospels only record that Jesus led Peter, James, and John “up a high mountain.” Mount Tabor certainly is a dramatic site with its rounded top standing some 420 meters above the eastern end of the Jezreel Valley. It is not the highest mountain, however, that honor goes to Mount Hermon and some scholars suggest that this might actually be the true site of the Transfiguration of Christ. That being said, it is evident that the early Christians believed that Mount Tabor was the genuine site of this miraculous event as evidenced by the three Byzantine era chapels that were built and dedicated to the Transfiguration. These chapels are believed to have been built sometime between the 4th and 6th centuries. They eventually fell into disrepair or were destroyed by the many invading armies that occupied Israel over the centuries.

When the Crusaders conquered the region they also built a church in honor of the Transfiguration on the ruins of the much older Byzantine ruins, but this church was also destroyed, this time by the Mamluk Turks. Four hundred years would pass in which Christians were not allowed to visit the site, then in the 17th century the Franciscans were given permission to settle there. Ruins of both the Byzantine and Crusader era churches were discovered and during the 19th century construction began on a new church complex which would become known as the Church of the Transfiguration. The Church contains three grottos which date back to the Crusader church. These grottos, also known as the three tabernacles, commemorate the three tabernacles that Peter wanted to build, one for the Master (Jesus), and one for Moses and the other for Elijah.



Mount Tabor. Note: the structure on top of the mountain is the Church of the Transfiguration.



View from the bus while on the road to the Church of the Transfiguration.





Father Joel reading from Matthew 17, the Transfiguration of Christ in the Grotto of Christ.

Mural of Moses in the Grotto of Moses.



Mural of Elijah from the Grotto of Elijah.



Byzantine era mosaic floor.



View of the Jezreel Valley from the roof of the Church of the Transfiguration. The Jezreel Valley is known as the “Breadbasket of Israel;” appropriately Jezreel means, “God sows.” Many battles have been fought in the Jezreel Valley including that between Israel and the Canaanites where the prophetess and judge of Israel, Deborah, and her general Barak destroyed the armies of Sis’era including his nine hundred chariots and charioteers. (Judges 4: 4-24)

Reflections

Jan’s Reflection:

Peter, James, and John did not know what they were going to encounter when they ascended Mount Tabor with Jesus. Six days prior Jesus told the disciples that He would go to Jerusalem, suffer and be killed and raised on the 3rd day. They could not wrap their heads around this and Peter even rebuked the Lord and told Him these things must not happen.

Everything changes when they arrive at the top of Tabor. Jesus is transfigured in all His glory in the bright clouds of the Holy Spirit. Peter, James, and John see Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus regarding His passion and exodus. And then they hear the audible voice of God the Father telling them, “This is my beloved Son—listen to Him.” Wow, this is a lot to take in. I believe what happens is key to moving forward. The disciples had not been listening and they were not obedient. Time was running out. Now they are on their faces before Jesus and the Holy Trinity and they are afraid. But Jesus tells them not to be afraid. They are being prepared to walk in the humiliation of the cross and the passion of Christ. They have just received an unbelievable gift from the undivided Trinity and they are being grounded fast in a revelation of Jesus and are being strengthened for the journey ahead.

After the transfiguration these disciples are emboldened to speak and John speaks of having seen His glory, Peter too speaks of having been an eyewitness of His majesty and how He heard God’s voice proclaiming, “This is my beloved Son—Listen to Him.”

The Transfiguration was not only a preparation for the disciples, but proof and a foretaste of the coming of Christ in all His glory.

May we too be empowered and emboldened to know the Lord of Glory for we are not called to a spirit of fear, but of power; love and of discipline.

Kevin's Reflection: The Plan of the Mystery Hidden for Ages

³ *And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Eli'jah, talking with him [Jesus].*

Have you ever wondered what Moses, Elijah, and Jesus were talking about? I have, not only that, I think I know. I think it was a strategy session on a covert mission that was started four thousand years earlier:

¹⁴ *The LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you above all cattle, and above all wild animals; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. ¹⁵ **I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.**" (Gen 3:14-15)*

This rather cryptic passage, particularly verse 15, is known as the *Protoevangelium*, or "First Gospel." We all know the story as recounted in Genesis chapter 3. Adam and Eve are deceived by the Serpent (Satan) who tells them that they will be *like God* if they disobey Him and eat the apple. They do, and things immediately go from bad to worse, the worse being what we call the *Fall*. God dishes out punishment on Adam and Eve, but especially the Serpent (Satan) when He sets into motion a "covert mission" to undo the Serpent's devious attack on humanity; a mission that would be accomplished by the "seed of the woman." For the next four thousand years there would be enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent, but now a decisive battle was at hand.

⁴ *But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵ to ransom those under the law, so that we might receive adoption. (Gal 4:4)*

That "woman" was Mary, and that "Son" was Jesus. And now, the time of that decisive battle was nearing, and Jesus needed to prepare Himself and His disciples for His passion and resurrection, which would redeem humanity and seal the fate of the Serpent and his seed. I believe that on Mount Tabor Jesus was conferring with two old veterans of the conflict, Moses and Eli'jah, and sharing with them now the mystery that had been hidden from the ages which the Apostle Paul discussed in his letter to the Ephesians:

⁸ *To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, ⁹ and to make all men see what is **the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; ¹⁰ that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places. ¹¹ This was according to the eternal purpose which he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, (Eph 3:8-11, emphasis added)***

The "mystery hidden for the ages" had to be kept secret from the "principalities and powers in the heavenly places," that is, from the Serpent and his seed until the mission was accomplished. That mission was accomplished during the Triduum of Holy Week in the suffering, death, and resurrection of the "seed of the woman," Christ Jesus our Lord. And it was about this I believe that Jesus was conferring with Moses and Elijah. There are a couple of reasons why I believe that the Transfiguration is connected with the Pascal Mystery of our Lord.

Just before Jesus leads Peter, James, and John up the mountain He tells them something that must have been pretty cryptic or at least difficult to understand:

²⁴ *Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.*

We all know what Jesus was talking about because He denied Himself in the Garden of Gethsemane when He said, "Not my will, but thine be done" (Luke 22:42). We also know that Jesus took up His cross and carried it up another mountain, Calvary, where He was crucified and died. The apostles, of course, did not know anything about this since it had not happened yet. What could they have possibly thought Jesus meant by this cryptic remark about taking up your cross?

The proximity of this cryptic remark by Jesus to His Transfiguration suggests a linkage between the cross and His glorification in the resurrection prefigured on Mount Tabor:

And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as light. (Matt 17:2)

The second reason suggesting linkage between the Transfiguration and Jesus' Passion is the necessity of maintaining secrecy regarding His Triduum mission as evidenced by the instructions that Jesus gave Peter, James, and John after the Transfiguration:

⁹And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, "Tell no one the vision, until the Son of man is raised from the dead."

Why did the Transfiguration have to be kept a secret such that it could only be spoken of after the resurrection? It is because if they had discussed the events of the Transfiguration it might have revealed mission critical information to the enemy, and after the resurrection it wouldn't matter any more; the enemy would have been already defeated. Saint Paul explains this in his first letter to the Corinthians,

⁷But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glorification. ⁸None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. (1Cor 2:7-8)

It was essential for the operational success of the mission, the redemption of humanity, that secrecy be maintained. This suggests that had there been a leak and Satan learned of the mission and its objective he would have never "entered Judas' heart" so that he would betray the Lord (Luke 22:3), nor would he have "inspired" Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin to conspire to execute Jesus. Jesus knew this and that is why He told Peter, James, and John not to say anything of what they had witnessed on Mount Tabor until after His resurrection.

But why take the risk, particularly with Peter who had already shown himself to be impulsive, and sometimes even putting his foot in his mouth? I believe that there may be several reasons for this: (1) Jesus was going into battle and He wanted allies to support Him in His mission, (2) Jesus recognized that His arrest, crucifixion, and death would be devastating for His disciples and He wanted to begin to prepare His disciples for this, (3) Jesus was preparing them for the crosses that they too would have to bear, and finally (4) seeing Him in His glorified state would give them the hope and the faith to endure the suffering because they would know the glory that awaited them because they too would someday be glorified as Jesus had been on the Mount of Transfiguration and the Resurrection.

Let's examine this further beginning with Jesus wanting allies for the battle that awaited Him. But, why would Jesus need or want allies, after all He need only utter a word and legions of angels would come to His aide and destroy Satan and his demon seed? Nevertheless, I believe Jesus wanted allies, may be even needed allies. Why? Because in His incarnation and *kenosis* He chose to need our faith and wanted our participation with Him; He is so humble that He wants His Bride to share in His victory. He chose to be like us in all things except sin, and that meant He chose to need His brethren to complete His salvific mission as we need one another in all that God commands us to do.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ²looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. (Heb 12:1-2)

Jesus' cloud of witnesses included the Patriarch, the Judges, the Kings, and the Prophets of Israel as represented by Moses and Elijah. The Apostles, disciples, and His mother would be His living witnesses, and they would be represented by Peter, James, and John. With them and for them He would persevere, and endure the cross and its death for the joy of the many sons He would bring to glory and of being seated at the right hand of the Father.

⁹But we see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for every one. ¹⁰For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through suffering. ¹¹For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified have all one origin. That is why he is not ashamed to call them brethren, ¹²saying,

*"I will proclaim thy name to my brethren,
in the midst of the congregation I will praise thee." (Heb 2:9-12)*

We too have a cloud of witnesses. Yes, the Old Testament witnesses that Jesus had, but also Mary, the Apostles, the martyrs, and all the saints known and unknown who stand before God continually glorifying Him and interceding for us, the Church Militant here on earth. Above all, we have Jesus whoever lives to intercede to His Father on our behalf (Heb 7:25). We all have our crosses to bear, let us do so aware of this great cloud of victorious allies in the

“faith once delivered by the saints” (Jude 1:3). Let us persevere and endure our crosses knowing that our own Transfiguration awaits us as Christ prepares His Bride to share in the glory of the Bridegroom’s Trinitarian life.

So let us not be silent of Christ’s Transfiguration or of His victory over sin and death, but let us all share the Good News of our Bridegroom, the seed of the Woman, and savior of our souls.



Mary Ark of the Covenant Monstrance

Jesus as Eucharistic Mystery is the “seed” of the woman, Mary, the Ark of the New Covenant not of stone tablets brought down from Mount Sinai, but of flesh and blood sacrificed once and for all for the redemption of humankind on Calvary.

¹⁹Then God’s temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple; and there were flashes of lightning, loud noises, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail. And a great portent appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars; ² she was with child and she cried out in her pangs of birth, in anguish for delivery. (Rev 11:19; 12:1-2)