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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_churchman\\_os.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php)

## THE TRANSFIGURATION OF OUR LORD.

BY THE VERY REV. LEB. E. FFRENCH, B.A., Provost of Kilmacduagh and Canon of Clonfert, Rector of Ballinasloe, Co. Galway.

THE interest of Irish Churchmen in the story of Our Lord's Transfiguration has been quickened since the last revision of the Prayer Book "according to the use of the Church of Ireland" was completed in 1926. Till then this great event was not even noted in the Calendar, but it is now commemorated on August 6, not as a "black-letter" day as in the English Book, but as a leading Festival, with special Collect, Epistle, and Gospel.

Readers of *THE CHURCHMAN* will recall an instructive article by Bishop Knox in October, 1928, on The Transfiguration, from which doubtless many as well as the present writer learned much, in which its significance to Our Lord Himself was reverently discussed "with the greatest learning and theological grace." In a most helpful manner the Bishop treats of "the spiritual reassurance which was ministered to" the Lord on the mountain ("probably Hermon"), and shows that the Transfiguration was "a succour given in answer to the prayers of a really tempted Jesus." It was "a sublime answer to intensely fervent prayer, which prayer was prompted by a real sense of need. The battle-ground of the Transfiguration was as desperate as that of the Temptation in the wilderness, and hardly, if at all, less desperate than that of Gethsemane." This is in harmony with Dr. Sanday's statement, "The narrative reminds us in more ways than one of those of the Baptism and Temptation."<sup>1</sup> Some popular writers adopt the same view. A well-known Irish clergyman says: "Meditate for a moment on that scene. Look at the Lord Himself, rapt in prayer, steadfastly setting Himself to go to Jerusalem to die. May we reverently say that He needed prayer for Himself, that in it His soul might be calm and still in the unruffled peace of the Father's presence? Was this the answer to His prayer, bringing the exile back for the moment to the precincts of His home, to hear the approval of the Father, to be glorified with 'the glory which He had before the world was'?"<sup>2</sup>

Another, a Scottish divine, writes: "His prayers received a splendid answer in the Transfiguration. That glorious scene . . . was chiefly intended for Himself. It was a great gift of His Father, an acknowledgment of His fidelity up to this point, and a preparation for what lay before Him."<sup>3</sup>

But not all will assent to Dr. Knox's assertion, "All explanations of the Transfiguration as meant to confirm the faith of the disciples are undoubtedly erroneous." That such interpretations are imperfect or defective may be admitted, but can we say more than this in the face of 2 Peter i. 16-19? Whatever view may be held as to the authorship of this Epistle, it will not be questioned that

it emanated from the Petrine school in the early Church, and is intended to represent the teaching of the great Apostle. The Bishop rightly emphasises the part played by the disciples as "witnesses attesting the reality of the experience," i.e. "as confirming its reality for Jesus"; but in the New Testament passage referred to is it not implied, not only that these disciples pointed to what they had seen and heard when they were "eye-witnesses of their Master's Majesty" as attesting the truth of their message concerning Him, but also that their own faith had been "confirmed" by their experiences on "the holy mount"? In St. John i. 14, there is perhaps another reference to those experiences: "We beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father."

When we remember that, as the late Mr. Latham and others have taught us, Our Lord was at this time throwing the best of His time and strength into the task of training the Apostles for the great work which lay before them when His bodily Presence was withdrawn, it is natural to believe that He had this strengthening of their faith in view when He took the three who had hitherto shown themselves most responsive to His teaching and most capable of grasping higher truths "*apart by themselves, and was transfigured before them.*"

The analogy of similar occurrences in Our Lord's life tends to establish this opinion. At His Baptism the descending spirit was not only a veritable "anointing" of Jesus "with the Holy Ghost and with power," probably conveying also a gift of Illumination—"He learned when His business was to commence and how it would be done" <sup>4</sup>; it was also the sign to the Baptist that "this was the Son of God." And when in the last week of His life "a voice from heaven" answered the prayer which, when His soul was troubled, Jesus offered, "Father, glorify Thy name," He testified, "This voice hath not come for My sake, but for your sakes."

Again, His words which followed His thanksgiving immediately before the raising of Lazarus convey an intimation that even in His closest intercourse with the Father the thought of helping the faith of others was present to Our Lord's mind. "Father, I thank Thee that Thou hearest me. And I knew that Thou hearest me always: but because of the multitude which standeth around I said it, that they may believe that Thou didst send me."

We must allow also full weight to the fact that the three Evangelists, whose testimony differs in this particular from what is stated in 2 Peter i. 17, all imply that the voice which "came out of the cloud" spoke not, as at the Jordan, to Our Lord,\* but to the Apostles,—"*This is My beloved Son; hear ye Him.*"

"The divine voice declares that all divine revelation is now included in the Lord Himself. Moses and Elijah, representing the Law and the Prophets, pass away, leaving "Jesus only."<sup>5</sup>

"The voice which addressed Jesus as God's Son at His Baptism now reveals Him as God's Son to the three disciples."<sup>6</sup>

\* In this St. Mark and St. Luke in their account of the Baptism agree as against St. Matthew.

Is it "to consider too curiously" to think that He who "knew what was in man" may have perceived that these disciples in particular needed to be emancipated from too strong an allegiance to what "Moses and Elijah" stood for at this date in the Jewish Church? St. Peter in the after years acknowledged that the "yoke" of the Mosaic Law had become an intolerable "burden," and how difficult it was for him to cast it off is shown by St. Luke's narrative of this Apostle's Vision at Joppa, and by St. Paul's reference to his "dissimulation" at Antioch. James and John merited a rebuke from their Master when they wished to "bid fire come down from heaven" and "consume" certain Samaritans. Even if the words "as Elijah did" are not part of the true text (and there is good authority for them), their request indicated that they were possessed by the "spirit" which they believed to have been his. This may appear fanciful, but the purport of the voice "from the excellent glory" is, as we have seen, in the main clear, even as "the appearance of Moses and Elijah by the side of, and as it were ministering to Jesus, symbolised to the disciples the Law and the Prophets as leading up to and receiving their fulfilment in the Gospel."<sup>1</sup> Peter, James, and John were on the mount not only as "Witnesses," but as Learners.

A closer examination of the words spoken to the three Apostles shows that a deeper meaning lay in them than we have yet noticed, and enhances our sense of the importance of the message given them, especially when we remember the point in Our Lord's life at which the Transfiguration occurred. He had now reached "the climax of His earthly manifestation." The three Evangelists carefully fix the date as about a week after St. Peter's great confession at Casarea Philippi, and they all make it plain that it was just after Our Lord had begun to prepare His immediate followers for His rejection by His countrymen and His death of shame. "And He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again."

A well-known commentary has the following note on this verse in St. Mark: "Jesus devotes Himself to training the twelve *in the shadow of the Cross*. This concentration on His disciples becomes possible when they pierce His secret."<sup>6</sup> (It is implied that St. Peter's confession shows they have done so.) But how far is this true of the disciples? St. Peter's answer to the question, "Who say ye that I am?" rejoiced the Lord's heart because it afforded evidence that, at the time when His Mission in Galilee appeared to have failed, His intimate friends and scholars had grasped so much of the truth concerning Himself that He saw in them "the nucleus of the future Church," the foundation of which He could now with all the authority that centred in Him declare to be well and truly laid. A special blessing was pronounced upon Peter for his answer in the solemn and memorable words, obviously spoken with deep emotion, which, though found only in one Gospel, "seem unmistakably to be Our Lord's"<sup>5</sup>; but Peter had spoken, in St.

Chrysostom's phrase, as "the mouth of the Apostles," and so had given utterance to "the first real Confession of the Church." <sup>4</sup> This Confession is probably preserved for us in its original form in St. Mark's or in St. Luke's Gospel,— "Thou art the Christ"; "The Christ of God"; and appears to be interpreted in St. John vi. 69,—"We have believed and know that Thou art the Holy One of God." And yet, welcome as this evidence was to Our Lord that His careful education of the twelve had not been in vain, the Confession fell far short of that true faith concerning His Person to which the Apostolic band was guided by the Holy Spirit in the after days when Jesus was "declared to be the Son of God with power . . . by the resurrection of the dead."

It is a great point gained that Peter has now consciously reached the firm ground of Messianic acknowledgment, <sup>4</sup> . . . but, just as the words he spoke a little later on the Mount, "not knowing what he said," seem to indicate that he thought of Our Lord, with Moses and Elijah, as scarcely more than "primus inter pares," so now his reply to Christ's searching question appears to us more reminiscent of the Confession of Nathaniel in the Fourth Gospel than anticipatory of that of St. Thomas. "The secret of the Lord" is not yet fully "pierced." But at the Transfiguration a higher truth concerning Jesus than he had hitherto grasped was revealed to Peter and his companions, though, as has been suggested, it was only subsequently, in the light of the Resurrection, that they and the rest of the faithful Eleven came fully to perceive its significance. We are distinctly told that their Master's command to keep silence concerning "the Vision" "till the Son of Man be risen from the dead," was strictly observed. The inference may fairly be drawn that after the Lord's Resurrection the favoured three related in full to their colleagues all that they had seen and heard.

We may now consider a little more closely the Divine message. St. Mark and St. Matthew record the words as "This is My beloved Son; hear ye Him." St. Matthew adds after "Son," "in whom I am well pleased." St. Luke, according to the text adopted by the Revisers, has, "This is My Son, My chosen, hear ye Him"; but here also "many ancient authorities read 'My beloved Son.'"

Assuming for a moment that "My chosen" (Greek, *ὁ ἐκλεκτός*) is the correct version of the words, it is of interest to notice that *in this Gospel* the same epithet "Chosen" (Greek, *ὁ ἐκλεκτός*), is scornfully addressed to the crucified Saviour in the mocking taunt of "the rulers" (St. Luke xxiii. 35); "He saved others; let him save himself, if this is the Christ of God, His chosen." And if St. John, as he stood by the Cross, heard these words, would they not awaken in his mind an echo of the Voice which came "out of the cloud," and proclaimed "This is My Son, My chosen," when the conversation, mentioned only in this Gospel, was finished in which Jesus spake with Moses and Elijah "concerning His decease which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem"? As he looked back, this would help him to perceive, not so much while he remained upon Golgotha as in his meditations afterwards, "the essential

connexion of the Transfiguration with the Passion," and he would be led to see that the brief though dazzling glimpse which had been granted to him and his brother and their friend of Christ in glory, and the words which they heard, were intended to prepare them for the coming woes. It is an old thought expressed by an illustrious teacher of the fifth century that such a purpose lay behind the Transfiguration in the counsels of God. "Before Jesus suffered, to prepare the innermost circle of disciples to bear it, they were given the vision of His glory and the assurance of the divine authority of the Christ, 'My son, My chosen One.' 'In transfiguratione,' says Leo the Great, 'illud principaliter agebatur ut de cordibus discipulorum scandalum crucis tolleretur.'" <sup>5</sup>

But there is greater weight of authority for the version of the words preserved by St. Mark in what we have come to regard as practically St. Peter's Gospel, and by St. Matthew, who incorporated St. Mark's account, and also in what is perhaps the true text of St. Luke, viz. "*My beloved Son.*" This (*ἀγαπητός*) was the adjective applied by the Father to His "Son" at Our Lord's Baptism, as the three Evangelists tell us,—“Thou art My beloved Son”—or, as St. Matthew has it, “This is My beloved Son,”—“in Whom I am well pleased.” We may reverently say it appears antecedently probable that at the Transfiguration the identical word would again be used.

But now we shall do well to remember the appeal of Athanasius to “those skilled in Greek idioms and to Homer, when asserting against the Arians” that “*only Son*” is the true meaning of *ἀγαπητός*.<sup>5</sup> “The Voice from heaven repeats the witness of the Baptism; Jesus is not only God's Anointed, but *God's only Son.*” We are again reminded of the testimony of St. John; “We beheld His glory, glory *as of the only begotten from the Father.*” To grasp this truth concerning Jesus would mean for the disciples a considerable advance in “the knowledge of Christ,” from that to which they had as yet attained, even if we accept as historical the full form of the Confession uttered at Cæsarea Philippi as it is given in St. Matthew's Gospel. Even more than the assurance that Jesus was the “Chosen” of God, the revelation concerning His person, “This is My only Son,” would help the Apostles in their future ministry to meet the stumbling-block of the Cross. Of course they did not at the time understand the full implication of the heaven-sent message. We can, perhaps, as Dr. Edersheim thought, trace “a retrogression” from the faith to which they had attained before “Jesus began to show unto his disciples” His coming unimaginable sufferings and “the glories that should follow them.” “Never afterwards, till His Resurrection, did their faith reach so high.” <sup>4</sup> Even after the Resurrection, of the reality of which they had been convinced “by many proofs,” and the Ascension of the Lord into heaven and the Pentecostal gift of the Holy Spirit, the Apostles do not appear for some time to have grasped the full truth of their Lord's true Divinity.

An examination of what St. Luke tells us of St. Peter's addresses

in "the Acts" leads us to think that in the earliest days of the Church there was "no thought-out doctrine of the person of Christ." Peter had not as yet risen above the conception of Jesus as "a man approved of God by mighty works and wonders and signs," Who after His violent death and Resurrection was exalted "at the right hand of God," and had "poured forth" the promised gift of the Spirit, the effect of which was manifest to all dwellers in Jerusalem, and who should come again at "the times of restoration of all things" "in His Kingdom," to which the penitent robber had had faith to look forward. Even the title "the Prince of Life," "belongs to the vocabulary of the Messianic hope."<sup>5</sup>

But a deeper doctrine concerning Our Lord's Person appears to underlie the references with which this Apostle's generally accepted Epistle abounds to Christ's "fore-known" sufferings for us, and the "precious blood" wherewith we have been "redeemed," and the belief in the Holy Trinity implied in its opening verses.

We are perhaps on firmer ground when we turn to that Ephesian Gospel which, if we cannot confidently claim that its author was "the beloved disciple," at all events emanated from the Johannine School, and which was written in order to lead its readers to believe that "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God"; and that not in the ordinary Messianic sense of these titles, but that they might "believe on His Name" as that of "the Only begotten Son" Who so perfectly "declared" God that "he that had seen Him had seen the Father"; Who was indeed, according to what Bishop Westcott calls "the best attested reading" in St. John i. 18, "God only begotten"; and to all who "believed" in Him, whether they had "seen" Him or not, their "Lord" and their "God." This conception of Christ underlies all the Johannine writings, which lay such stress upon the blood which "redeems" and "cleanses us from all sin," and present Jesus as "the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world," and as "He that came by water and blood."

The suggestion of this essay is that the recollection of their Vision of Christ in glory, and in particular of the Voice from what they had recognised as the Shekinah (for "they feared as they entered into the cloud"), greatly helped Peter and John and their colleagues, to whom they had now related their experiences on that awe-ful occasion, in their progress to this true faith which interpreted for them the Mystery of the Cross, and that this was intended by God Himself who spoke to them out of the "bright cloud." "We beheld His glory" (cf. "they saw His glory," St. Luke ix. 32)\*; "There came such a Voice from the excellent glory . . . and this Voice we heard."

This was ever the "apology" of Peter and John; "We cannot but speak the things which we saw and heard"; "That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you." This connexion

\* Cf. also St. John xii. 41, "he saw His glory." Here indubitably the reference is to the "glory" of Deity. Isaiah asserts that he saw "the Lord," even "the King, the Lord of hosts."

of the Transfiguration with the Passion is worthy of note in the present day. There has been since the Great War a marked return to the Cross in Christian thought and preaching. Nevertheless we are still far from a final theory concerning the atoning sacrifice consummated upon the "green hill far away." Much that is written on this "κεφάλαιον" of our faith, as Athanasius called it, seems to us inadequate and unsatisfying. The more books we read on the subject the more, like Bishop Butler, we realise the difficulty of explaining "How, or in what particular way, Christ's death was efficacious." We endorse the opinion of one of the most distinguished of Irish Primates that "our wisest hymn before the Cross" is

" I cannot understand the woe  
Which Thou wert pleased to bear,  
O dying Lamb! I only know,  
That all my hope is there "7

Perhaps "there will always be (as the late Canon Mozley thought) "a shadow round the Cross." But this at least may be said with some assurance; a proper estimate of the Person of the Sufferer is an indispensable requisite for a right understanding of the New Testament presentation of the doctrine of the Atonement. Here the Gospel story of the Transfiguration helps us.

" Who hath dreamed that when the Cross in darkness rested,  
Upon the Victim's hidden face no love was manifested? "

Certainly, once the faith which they seem to have lost during the Passion, had been restored, no doubt on this point could have disturbed the minds of those who had seen their Master's face "shine as the sun,"\* and heard the eternal Father's testimony to Him.

And still a glory from the "high mountain" illumines the Cross. The dew of Hermon falls on the hill of Zion; while, as we kneel in deepest penitence and faith at the feet of our Crucified Saviour, a Voice from the Throne sounds in our ears, "This is My Son, My Chosen"; nay more, "This is My Only Son."

\* Cf. Rev. i. 16. The action and words of the glorified Christ of which the Seer of Patmos tells us here remind us forcibly of the narrative of the Transfiguration (*vid.* St. Matthew xvii. 6, 7). They would help St. John if, as Archbishop Bernard thought, he was the Seer, to realise that this was the same Jesus.

#### REFERENCES.

- <sup>1</sup> H.D.B., article, "Jesus Christ."
- <sup>2</sup> J. Paterson Smyth, D.D., *People's Life of Christ.*
- <sup>3</sup> J. Stalker, D.D., *Life of Jesus Christ.*
- <sup>4</sup> Edersheim, *Jesus the Messiah.*
- <sup>5</sup> Gore's Commentary.
- <sup>6</sup> Peake's Commentary.
- <sup>7</sup> Archbishop Alexander, *Verbum Crucis*, on Isaiah liii. 12.