

The Transfiguration in God's Plan of Salvation

Second Sunday of Lent - Lk 9:28b-36

Ave Maria Catholic Church, March 13, 2022 - Fr. David M Vidal

This Sunday, the Gospel leads us to the Mount of Transfiguration. Moses and Elijah appeared, and they were speaking with Jesus. Moses was the great law-giver of the people of Israel. Elijah was the greatest of the prophets.

Moses, the great leader of the people of Israel, was a figure of Christ. In his Catechesis for the Second Week of Lent, St John Chrysostom explains: *"Their great leader and commander was Moses; we have a new Moses, God himself, as our leader and commander,"* (Cat 3, 24-27: SC 50, 165-167).

The new Moses, Jesus, is greater than the old one. The old Moses was only a figure of the true Savior of the people of Israel. God chose the old Moses to lead the chosen people from the place of slavery to the promised land, saving them from the power of Pharaoh.

The new Moses was sent by God the Father to save his people from the slavery of sin and lead them to the true homeland, heaven itself, the place prepared for those who love God. The new Moses indeed saves his people by the triumph of his Cross. And Jesus is not only the Savior of a nation but the Savior of the world. Therefore, those bitten by the poisonous snakes of sin, lifting their eyes to Jesus on the Cross, could receive health and salvation. Because *"just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life,"* (John 3: 14-15).

But even more; the old Moses raised his hands to heaven and brought down manna; the new Moses raises his hands to heaven and gives us the food of eternal life. The old Moses struck the rock and brought forth streams of water in the desert; Christ is the rock and from His side flows rivers of living water.

Finally, with St John, we come to the realization that *"the Law was given through Moses, grace and truth have come through Jesus Christ,"* (Jn. 1:18). Jesus is the author of the final and everlasting covenant between God's people and God Himself. This is a covenant not sealed with the blood of animals but with the blood of Christ.

The second person conversing with Jesus was Elijah, the greatest of the prophets. His name in Hebrew means *"My God is Yahweh."* Elijah was the prophet that summoned the people of Israel to Mount Carmel, telling them: *"If the LORD is God, follow him."* (1 Kings 18:21). Then, he called the 450 prophets of Baal, and challenged them to offer a holocaust, but the fire had to be sent by God himself. The 450 false prophets shouted, but their shouts were not answered. Elijah simply said: *"Answer me, LORD! Answer me, that these people may know that you, LORD, are God,"* (1 Kings 18: 37). And fire came down and consumed the offering. Later, Elijah, the great prophet of God, was assumed into heaven. (2 Kings

2:3–9). And from that time on, the scribes and the people of Israel believed that Elijah would return to prepare the coming of the Messiah, (see Mt. 17: 10).

We do not know the words that were exchanged between Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. The Evangelists Matthew and Mark do not mention them. However, St Luke has indicated that “[they] spoke of his exodus. The exodus that he was going to accomplish in Jerusalem,” (Lk. 9: 31). St. Matthew confirms that truth: “As they were coming down from the mountain, Jesus charged them, “Do not tell the vision to anyone until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.” (Mt. 17: 9).

It was as if the princes of Israel, Moses the law-giver, and Elijah the prophet, were delighting themselves in that conversation concerning the work of salvation. They knew who Jesus was, and they knew that Jesus was about to fulfill all the promises made to the Fathers of Israel.

However, Moses and Elijah were not the only ones on that mountain. We know that “Jesus took Peter, James and John his brother . . . And he was transfigured before them,” (Mt 17:1-2).

We can recall Raphael's great masterpiece. The figure of Jesus dominates the scene, his face shining “like the sun” and his garments “white as light.” The Gospel relates that Jesus “was transfigured before them.”

St Luke also recounts that “Peter and his companions had been overcome by sleep, but becoming fully awake, they saw his glory, and the two men standing with him,” (Lk 9:32). This Gospel passage offers an important detail: “when they were fully awake, they saw his glory.”

In life, we miss so much because our minds are asleep. Certain things keep our minds asleep, such as pre-judgments, false desires, and love of ease. The Transfiguration is a special sign of God’s providential plan that awakens us to perceive the beauty of His plan of salvation. In the Transfiguration, the need of humanity, our drowsiness, meets the mercy of God, who shows the divinity of his Son, a Son ready to give his life for the salvation of many.

Why does the Church present the Gospel of the Transfiguration of the Lord to us now, as we are just beginning this second week of Lent?

This question can be answered if we remember that the 40-day penitential period for the Christian community is a time of preparation for the celebration of Jesus' Resurrection. Christ's Transfiguration on Mount Tabor is a preparation, as it were for Jesus' Passion, Death, and Resurrection. And it is a preparation for the understanding that there is a connection between suffering and glory and that there is no redemption and glorification without suffering and death.

When Jesus speaks of his Passion and Death, he always adds: *“And on the third day the Son of Man will be raised,”* (cf. Lk 9:22). In the Transfiguration, this announcement becomes a vision of what the body of Christ would be after the Resurrection: it would be a glorious body. The Father, in His providence, prepares the Apostles for the sorrowful experience of Holy Week. It is as though he wanted to say: you will be witnesses to the Son's terrible sufferings, witnesses to his death on the Cross. But do not lose heart! All this leads to the Resurrection.

In his letter to the Philippians, the Apostle Paul gives a beautiful and complete commentary on the mystery of the Lord's Transfiguration.

The Apostle writes: *“But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it, we also expect a savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will change our lowly body to conform with his glorified body by the power that enables him also to bring all things into subjection to himself,”* (Phil 3:20-21).

The Lord's Transfiguration is a sign of this divine power. Jesus has the power to transform humanity into God's likeness, the power to divinize us.

On the first day of Lent, as the ashes were placed on our forehead, we heard the words: *“Remember you are dust and to dust you will return”* (cf. Gn. 3:19). This is an obvious truth about the human body, which is subject to death and corruption. However, Jesus comes to us, goes to his passion for us, dies for us, and then rises from the dead. And when Jesus rises, he reveals that our mortal bodies are also called to share in that glory.

The Gospel of the Lord's Transfiguration shows that every ascetic effort connected with this season is directed towards the transfiguration of our humanity, towards its elevation in God. In the future resurrection, our mortal body will come to share in Christ's Resurrection and glory.

Therefore, the goal of our existence is as shining as the transfigured face of the Messiah: in Jesus, the purpose of our existence is salvation, happiness, glory, and the unlimited love of God. How, therefore, can we not be prepared to suffer for such a goal?

From the cloud came a voice that said, *“This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.”* (Mt 17: 5). Let us never take our eyes away from Jesus and let us listen to his invitation to follow Him carrying the daily crosses that God in his providence allows us to bear because it is only by accepting the mystery of the cross in our lives that we will enter into the glory of God's kingdom. Let us accept the Father's appeal: *“Let us listen to Jesus.”* Let us accept the encouragement of St. Paul: *“Let us stand firm in the Lord.”* Amen.