



Welcome to our Eucharistic Celebration

The Transfiguration of the Lord

August 6, 2017

St. Mary of the Assumption

Today's Themes in Scripture

The readings for the eighteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time are set aside today, since the Feast of the Transfiguration of Jesus falls on a Sunday this year.

Faith in an unseen God is often encouraged and strengthened by others who have experienced him in their lives. Each of today's Scriptures focus our attention on Jesus, so that our faith in him as Son of God, may be supported by the visions of a holy man and by the reports of eyewitnesses who saw him in his glory.

Daniel, was a faith-filled young man who was one of the first inhabitants of Jerusalem to be carried off to exile in Babylon. There his rock-solid faith in the God of Israel saved him from persecution, once in a lion's den, once in a fiery furnace. The latter part of the book that bears his name contains Daniel's visions. Daniel's visions are "apocalyptic;" they are vivid, highly symbolic depictions of spiritual realities that were shared with persecuted audiences, to arouse their faith and give them hope. In the excerpt read today, Daniel sees God, the Ancient One, enthroned, radiant, and worshiped by countless people. Then he sees another figure, a Son of Man, coming on clouds and approaching the Ancient One. He is then worshiped in glory and established as king over a vast, everlasting kingdom. When Jesus' disciples first searched the Scriptures to look for meaning in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, they came to believe that Daniel's visions pointed to Jesus, and supported many of the things he said and taught. Daniel's visions strengthened the faith of Jesus' early disciples and gave them a reason to hope, when they, too, faced persecution for their beliefs.

Matthew wrote his Gospel for Jewish converts to Christianity. His account of the life of Jesus was full of references to historical events, symbols, and Scriptures that would be well-known to his audience. Just before the Transfiguration, Jesus and some of his disciples climbed a high mountain, reminiscent of the place where Moses encountered God. On the mountain, Jesus met Moses and Elijah, the great representatives of the Law and Prophets. Matthew's audience would have recognized that his description of Jesus was much like Daniel's visions of God and a symbol like a cloud passing over them would have conveyed the idea that it was God himself speaking to them, confirming that Jesus was his son and instructing them to listen to him.

The Second Reading is from a letter attributed to St. Peter, written at a time when Christians were under persecution and struggling with their faith as they waited for Jesus to come again. The writer reminds his audience that the Gospel and stories of Jesus were not myths: there were eyewitnesses to the glory bestowed on Jesus by God. The words of these eyewitness are reliable and instructive in every age.

Sunday Readings and Backgrounds

Reading I: Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14

His clothing was snow bright.

- Daniel describes a powerful vision.
- God sits on his throne amidst many angels.
- God the Father entrusts the world to the care of his Son, Jesus Christ.

Responsorial Psalm: Ps. 119: 57, 72, 76-77, 127-128, 129-130.

Lord, I love your commands.

Reading II: 2 Peter 1:16-19

We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven.

- Peter describes what he saw and heard on the mount of the Transfiguration.
- He saw the glory of Jesus, the Father's Son. He heard the familiar words, "This is my Son, my beloved."
- We can cling to these words in times of difficulty.

Gospel: Matthew 17:1-9

His face shone like the sun.

- Jesus takes Peter, James and John with him.
- Jesus appears glowing with light. Moses and Elijah appear with him.
- The disciples witness the Transfiguration, but they do not understand it.

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Transformed In Love

When I was about 7 or 8 years old and my older brother's voice was changing he did something nice for me. (It's easy to remember because such an occurrence was so rare.) I was afraid that there was something under my bed, so he got down on the floor and controlling his transitioning vocal cords shouted one resounding baritone "Boo!" Then, he told me that whatever it was, it had run away and would never come back because it was so frightened — an emotion I knew too well myself. Because I had somebody bigger and scarier around, I never again had to fear anything under the bed.

Today's reading from the Book of Daniel is apocalyptic literature, a type of writing designed for people under great stress. It assures them that no matter how powerful the forces of evil seem, no matter how much suffering enemies inflict, God will win in the end, so there's nothing to worry about. Apocalyptic literature paints an image that depicts God as better and bigger and stronger than anything the people fear. So, in today's reading we get a version of the stereotyped image of God as a white-haired potentate surrounded by symbols of sovereignty. The most comforting thing about this scene is not that the "Ancient One" is so pure and prevailing, but that he gives his power to "one like a Son of man," someone more like human beings, less overwhelming than the Ancient One yet still worthy to receive an unassailable dominion. Humanity can rest in peace.

Today's Gospel contrasts with the reading from Daniel in a thought-provoking way. In Daniel we get a mind-boggling description of the God figure as white-haired, dazzlingly-dressed, enthroned and surrounded by fire with thousands eager to serve him. About the one like a Son of man we only hear that he came on the clouds.

The Gospel reading takes it for granted that we understand that the entire event centers on Jesus. The disciples already know him as somebody whose fingernails get just as dirty as theirs. Then suddenly they see him in a brilliantly different light. There on the mountain, they get a glimpse of the very core of his being. For a flashing moment they comprehend something about who he is in the light of everything they believe. They see the Jesus they have known even as his face shines with the truth of his relationship with the God he knows as his Abba. Unlike in Daniel's vision, they see no image of God. All they know about God in this scene comes from the voice which called Jesus the beloved, pleasing son to whom they should pay attention.

Daniel described an awesome image of God and then tempered the magnificence with someone like a human being. The Gospel simply offers the human Jesus as the visible image of God. That is astounding.

In the face of the transfigured Jesus, the disciples saw not only who Jesus was, but what humanity is created to be. That was perhaps the most overwhelming dimension of the entire experience. It's easy enough to look at a heavenly being and bow down and offer to build tents or temples. It's very freeing to pay worship to a majestic God who takes charge of everything. But that wasn't Jesus' message.

Jesus told Peter, James and John that it was time to go down from the mountain. It was time to return to his ordinary way of revealing who God is. They still needed time to understand not only that he was the image of God, but that they were called to be the same. What they saw and thought of as a glimpse of eternity was really nothing more than a revelation of the deepest meaning of their everyday history.

Over a hundred years ago the Blessed Metropolitan Anthony, a Russian Orthodox prelate, preached about this feast saying that the goal of the Lord's revelation was to persuade his followers that they too are to shine with the beauty of God's love. He said that people longed for the Christ who would reveal fearsome majesty while Jesus offered them simple humanity which has more potential for glory than we can ever imagine.

Blessed Anthony told his listeners to look around them, to see people who had been transformed. He told them to notice in their faces, their eyes, their tone of voice that which is infinitely attractive. In essence, Anthony tells us "Listen to them! Learn from how they have learned to live as God's beloved and are empowered to love as we are loved."

The message of the Transfiguration is not apocalyptic. Jesus doesn't boo away the demons. Instead, he shows us what every human being can become when open to transforming love.