

Mark

The Transfiguration

Ex 24:12ff

The Lord said to Moses: Come up to me on the mountain. *Stay there, and I will give you the stone tablets - the Law and the Commandment - which I have written for their instruction.* Moses made ready, with Joshua, his assistant, and they went up the mountain of God. He said to the elders: *Wait for us here until we come back to you. You have Aaron and Hur with you; if anyone has any matter to settle, let him go to them.* Moses then went up the mountain.

Cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the Lord rested on mount Sinai and the cloud covered it for six days. On the seventh day the Lord called to Moses from within the cloud. To the watching Israelites, the glory of the Lord looked like a devouring fire on the mountain-top. Moses went right into the cloud and went on up the mountain. Moses stayed on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

Ex 34:29ff

When Moses came down from mount Sinai with the two tablets of testimony in his hands, as he was coming down the mountain, Moses did not know that the skin of his face was radiant because he had been talking to him. And when Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin on his face was so radiant that they were afraid to go near him. But Moses called to them, and Aaron and all the leaders of the community rejoined him, and Moses talked to them, after which all the Israelites came closer, and he passed on all the orders that the Lord had given to him on mount Sinai. Once Moses had finished speaking to them, he put a veil over his face. Whenever Moses went into the Lord's presence to speak with him, he took the veil off until he came out. And when he came out he would tell the Israelites all the orders he had been given. And the Israelites would see Moses' face radiant. Then Moses would put the veil back over his face until he went in to speak with him next time.

The Apocalypse of Baruch 51:3ff

As for the glory of those who proved to be righteous on account of my law, those who possessed intelligence in their life, and those who planted the root of wisdom in their hearts: their splendour will then be glorified by transformations, and the shape of their face will be changed into the light of their beauty, so that they may acquire and receive the undying world that is promised to them.

Mark 9

The Transfiguration

There are clear echoes here of the Baptismal scene in which Jesus was first presented in the Gospel account. One important note in it is that in verse 6, which will be repeated in 14:40, the story of the agony in Gethsemane: *and once more he came back and found them sleeping, their eyes were so heavy: and they could find no answer for him.*

Some suggest that this is a transferred version of an Easter appearance-story: but in fact the Easter accounts are quite different. There is no Easter story which mentions heavenly companions, or a divine voice, or even, surprisingly, the visible glory of Jesus; what is more, there is no Easter account which does not include a *saying* of Jesus, and here Jesus says nothing. Again, although Luke imports the words: *they were speaking of his exodus, which he was to accomplish in Jerusalem*, Mark makes no mention of the forthcoming drama of death and resurrection. Furthermore, in the other Gospels the story is clearly present of Jesus appearing to Peter and to the Twelve, but there is nowhere a tradition of the risen Lord appearing to these three special disciples. Rather their gathering is specific to the earthly life of Jesus, taking place as it does three times in the rest of the Synoptic tradition. They are singled out at the raising of Jairus' daughter, at the Transfiguration, and at the Agony in Gethsemane.

I have provided you with some quotations from Exodus. Note that Moses' *face* is what is transfigured there, whereas Mark confines the brilliance to Jesus' *clothes*. The same theme is also reflected in the quotation from the apocalypse of Baruch. White is the colour of the angels, and the wearing of white or new clothing as the symbol of life in the resurrection is a common theme in and out of the earliest writings, especially the Book of Revelation. So things people were associating with the day of judgment, things which recall the experiences of Moses, are here associated with the living Jesus. Note that the presence of Elijah is another detail that evokes the end of the world in the Jewish mind (cf Mal 3) as is the presence of Moses. We have recently understood that certain people coupled Moses with Elijah as having been "translated" to heaven rather than dying; the account of his death at the end of Deuteronomy is equivocal. The Jews looked for the coming of "a prophet who would be like Moses"; surely this appearance of the twin harbingers of the end of the world, and of the fulfilment of the promises of God, place the saying of Jesus about the Cross (Mk 8:31) in a quite extraordinary frame. *Listen to Him* as he speaks openly and plainly of the deed which will inaugurate the end-time; listen to this divine message, at which Peter's human flesh revolts.

V 6 lays special emphasis on Peter's mistaken response to the scene. The odd desire to build tents for the visitors seems to suggest that the end-time has in fact begun, and that the eschaton - the end of the world - had arrived; the image of God and man resting together on the holy mountain is what has filled his mind. Peter habitually falls short of understanding, and habitually what he leaves out of account is the Cross itself. We recall that it is in the context of the previous chapter that this transfiguration is taking place: the contrast between Peter the

believer and Peter the man who refuses the Cross. In this story, the divine voice (perhaps rather sternly) says: *Listen to Him!* This cannot refer to anything Jesus is actually saying at that moment - he is saying nothing; it must refer to the last chapter and its unacceptable message.

We note that the return of Elijah is identified as having already happened; clearly Jews had questioned Christian understanding of Jesus as Messiah by asking why the great Prophet had not preceded him, as everyone expected. Mark's solution is to identify John the Baptist as Elijah, and thus to underscore the theme of suffering. Elijah suffered persecution and rejection as a prophet in Israel. John reproduced this in his life, and is thus patient of the comparison. In just the same way the transfigured Jesus is a suffering Messiah, who comes down from the mountain-top of his glory into the lowland where suffering and rejection await him. We are thus undergoing the transition from a theology of glory to a theology of the Cross - which, as we have seen, is the movement in which the whole Gospel, at this point, is engaged. We can now see that the aim of this story is to emphasise Mk 8:31 as the heart of the whole work.

The Healing of the Epileptic Boy

This story may have come in two versions. We can easily see that in the beginning and in verse 28 the emphasis is on the disciples and their ignorance. In vv 20-27 the emphasis is on the attitudes of the boy's father. We can also detect two different descriptions of the illness, one in v 18, the other in vv 21-22.

Authority as an issue is introduced at the beginning of the story. There is an argument afoot, between the disciples and the doctors of the Law - the classic tussle carried on in the early church, between the infant Christianity and its enemies. The struggle seems to be locked, and this is because, unlike their master, the disciples are lacking in faith, and thus have no authority. When Jesus appears, the crowd are transfixed: here is someone who carries real power, and they run to him and greet him.

v 19 - compare Jer 5:23 - 1K 19:14 - Num 14:27 - Deut 32:5, 20

v 20 the evil power challenges Jesus to combat at once; thus his authority itself causes tumult before anything positive is accomplished.

v 22 sensitively evokes the very tentative faith of the father.

v 26-27 evokes the imagery of resurrection very clearly.

The theme of prayer is introduced "privately" - that is, as a mystery within the life of the Church, in which Jesus mysterious parables have been illuminated in the absence of the crowds. This is a teaching which can be assimilated only within the overall context of belief in Jesus as the Christ.

Second Prediction of the Passion

The passive (“will be handed over”) is a divine passive, and the contrast between *the Son of Man* and *men* is deliberate. Despite being one of us, he is rejected by us and differentiated from us. We can probably assume that the ancient form is simply:

The Son of Man will be handed over to men

and the reference to death and resurrection are subsequent additions. This does not ask for human commentary, it is a direct communication from God to men; thus Jesus is travelling in secret, unacclaimed, and when he delivers his teaching, the most vital and powerful he has ever given them, they are unable to understand and afraid to ask. That is a measure of how foreign the Gospel is, at its heart, to human reasoning.

The Disciples are Ignorant

Once more we are indoors, and the lesson is very much personally directed at the Disciples. Mark is mercilessly depicting their blindness and deafness to Jesus.

v 34 shows the disciples, as before, totally in opposition to the way of Christ. In him God takes the lowly path, where man is obsessed with the longing for greatness and significance.

Who is truly a disciple?

John makes his only appearance in Mark. He is anxious about the outsider who is using Jesus’ name. We hear his response: the Church must never be anxious about its own extension or growth. The words are mysterious and perhaps would bear some discussion.

On Leading Others Astray

This brief passage is of importance. Some scholars suggest that Mark has no room for threats of judgment and punishment. They must have overlooked this passage, with its mention of being thrown into hell, and its assertion that to injure or disable some part of your own life is better than hell. Again, this would merit a long discussion: people today would advance the claims of their own nature, completely without any element of rational judgment, as warrant for almost any sort of behaviour. If behaving justly towards these little ones demands the mutilation of my life, the Gospel’s demand seems to be clear; and if all of this sounds somewhat Islamic in our

ears, we should note how far we are capable of retreating from the demands of the real Gospel.