

The Second Meeting of the Lent Course 2005

The Second Sunday of Lent

If you could sit down with a synopsis of the three Gospels describing the Transfiguration, you might think they were pretty similar. After a few minutes' thought, the differences would begin to appear. So, in spite of the fact that our real intention is to "listen to Him" (17: 5) in Matthew's version, I will try to point up and suggest the grounds for a few of the differences as we go through.

What did Matthew inherit from Mark, and how did he modify it? Mark's account is in chapter 9.

Mark wanted to emphasise the theme of the passion and resurrection of the Son of Man. He stresses the necessity of the Cross; he also introduces the two figures, who appear as

Elijah, with Moses

Now Elijah in Mark is identified with John the Baptist ("*Elijah has come already, and they treated him as they pleased*", Mk 9: 13); and John's death serves as a premonition of the death of Jesus himself (*Elijah is to come first to restore all things; and how is it written of the Son of Man, that he must suffer many things, and be treated with contempt?*"- Mk 9:12). Mark also wants to draw a line from Transfiguration to Gethsemane, and therefore makes the three witnesses identical (Mk 9: 2, 14: 33). The glorious appearance of Jesus has its echoes for Mark in the glory of the resurrection.

Now let us turn to Matthew.

Matthew has introduced significant changes into Mark's narrative.

(i) Moses now comes before Elijah. Emphasis on Elijah passes in favour of Moses.

(ii) Mark describes Jesus' garments becoming "glittering, intensely white as no fuller on earth could bleach them"(9: 3). Matthew reduces this to "white as light," but adds the words "and his face shone like the sun" (17: 2). Shining garments yield to a shining countenance; the obvious reference is to Exodus 34: 29-35, where "the skin of Moses face shone", because he had been talking to God. Exodus tells us that the shining of Moses' face was so unendurable that Moses had to veil his face in meeting other people.

(iii) Matthew uses the same verb for the appearing of the cloud, but adds the adjective *bright* (Gk *photeine*). This leads him into paradox: a *bright* cloud covers them with *shadow*. This can only be a direct reference to the Shekhinah, the cloud which filled the Tent of Meeting to signify God's presence on the Exodus journey through the desert. The Shekhinah was said to have "depths of light more intense than the midsummer sun".

(iv) Mark's heavenly voice identifies Jesus "This is my beloved Son". Matthew expands to "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased", the formula used in all three Synoptic Gospels at the *Baptism* of Jesus. This deliberately echoes our old friend, Isaiah 42: 1, the first of the four Servant Songs. It is interesting to see what the context of this phrase is. Here is the beginning of the Song:

Here is my Servant whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom my soul delights.
I have sent my spirit upon him, *that he may bring true judgment* to the nations

Clearly Matthew wanted to bring to the fore Jesus' vocation to carry the law (true judgment) to the world at large. This evokes the image of Moses, the Law-giver, who stood on a high mountain to converse with God at the giving of the Old Law, and whose countenance became unbearably bright.

(v) That the heavenly voice goes on to say *Listen to him* further emphasises Jesus' relationship to Moses, who in Deuteronomy 18: 15 says:

From among yourselves, from among your own brothers, Yahweh will raise up a prophet like me; *you will listen to him*. This is exactly what you asked Yahweh your God to do, at Horeb, on the day of the Assembly, when you said: *Never let me hear the voice of Yahweh my God, or see this great fire again, or I shall die*. Then Yahweh said to me: *What they have said is well said. From their own brothers I will raise up a prophet like yourself; I shall put my words into his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him. Anyone who refuses to listen to my words, spoken by him in my name, will have to render an account to me*.

This "prophet like Moses" became, like Elijah, one of the signs of the end of the world, an eschatological figure: so when, in the Fourth Gospel, people ask John the Baptist who he is, they ask *Are you the Christ? Are you Elijah? Are you The Prophet?*

The emphasis of our Matthean story is more certainly Mosaic in its broad lines than the story as told by Mark. Yet Matthew is only drawing to the fore what is already present in the tradition about the Transfiguration. If we examine Exodus 24 and 34 we find passages describing Moses on Mount Sinai at the giving of the Law which must certainly lie behind our story in the Gospel. Mark and Exodus both describe a high mountain, and a cloud, a voice from the cloud, and the central figures (Moses or Jesus) becoming radiant. Those looking on become afraid, the event happens "after six days" - that is, on the seventh day. Three people are mentioned as witnesses especially called by name. Finally, Moses and Elijah are the only people in the Old Testament who spoke directly to God on Mount Sinai. So clearly their presence in this Gospel story is meant to evoke Mount Sinai.

But if Matthew wants us to see the likeness between Jesus and Moses, Jesus is still immeasurably the greater. We can tell this by the fact that, when Moses and Elijah are gone, the disciples "find Jesus himself, *alone*." The insertion of *alone* here is Matthean, and it is emphatic. Surely he means to tell us that Jesus has taken Moses' place *and superseded him*. It is a live experience of what the Letter to the Hebrews says in its first lines:

At many moments in the past, and by many means, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets. But in our own time, in the last days, he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the ages. He is the reflection of God's glory, and bears the impress of God's own being, sustaining all things by his powerful command....

So it is that the voice from heaven speaks of Jesus as "my beloved Son", a title which Moses never had; and it passes over the great Law-giver in silence. So Jesus is like Moses, but at the same time greater than Moses.

Peter's Tents Very little comes of this suggestion by Peter, beyond the acknowledgement that tents are features of the Exodus, which has already been suggested by so many of the details of this story. It appears to suggest that Peter wanted the beatific moment to endure indefinitely. Some suggest that the Feast of Tabernacles had themes connecting it with the end of time, and that Peter may have thought the end of the world was nigh. It seems more likely that his mind was filled with the experience of encounter, and that he might have been speaking of the Tent of Meeting; but then why three tents? As it is, the moment is about to pass away, and the issue will be irrelevant.

The Cloud It is the sign of God's travelling with the Israelites, and plays its part in the Red Sea story. There is a certain suggestion that the return of the cloud might be expected as a symptom of the Last Days: we have Isaiah 4: 5 and 2 Macc 2:8 to display this theme.

The Voice In noticing a chiasmic structure in this story, I suggested that the voice of God is the real heart of the passage. Verse 6 will show the truth of this. In the pattern it comes as the disciples' reaction. It has no parallel in Mark or Luke at this point; it is inserted deliberately by the editor of the Gospel in order to make the chiasmic pattern good, in order to make the voice of God truly central. "And hearing, the disciples fell on their faces and feared exceedingly." The contrast is between the face of Jesus - which is shining - and the faces of the disciples - which are hidden. In Mark the disciples' fear is placed immediately after the Transfiguration and the sight of Elijah with Moses, to

emphasise that it was the vision that unnerved them. Luke makes the descent of the Cloud the occasion for fear, as the divine truth envelopes those who see. But here it is clearly the reception of the divine voice which puts the seers on the floor: *HEAR YE HIM!*

Jesus' raising of his disciples follows: this verse also is unique to Matthew:

And Jesus approached and touched them, saying *Rise, and do not fear*

The interpretation of the Transfiguration has sometimes stressed Jesus' divinity, seeing it as a proof; sometimes his humanity, seeing it as a vision of what our humanity will be in its risen state. So the early apocryphal writings either tell the story as an overwhelming glimpse of "Jesus as he really is", or depict the disciples asking Jesus where he is taking them, and being granted the sight of a humanity glorified by divine life.

In reading the story within the context of Matthew's great scheme, further important insights can be gained.

1 **Light** In Mt 4: 16 we are told *The people who lived in darkness have seen a great light; on those who lived in a country of shadow dark as death a light has dawned.* In our story that great light has become visible to those who are told in Mt 5: 14 *You are the light of the world.* These words come as Jesus delivers the Sermon on the Mount, replacing the Law of Moses with his own code of holiness. When they now see him go up the mountain and become like Moses, they know that history has come full circle, and that the new Moses surpasses the old. Now the new Israel is ready to enter the age of fulfilment, led by the Son of God.

2 **The Cross** Mt 16: 24-28 says *Anyone wanting to be my follower must renounce himself and take up his Cross and follow me. Anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it. What then will anyone gain by winning the whole world and forfeiting his life? Or what can anyone offer in exchange for his life? For the Son of man is going to come in the glory of his Father with his angels. Then he will reward each one according to his behaviour. In truth I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of man coming with his Kingdom.*

The pattern of progression - Cross first, then glory - is followed through.

There is an astonishing diptych between the Transfiguration and the Cross. In the confession of Jesus as Son of God in *both* panels lies the Christological unity between the two scenes. As Son of God Jesus must experience the whole gamut of possible human experience, because he is the Messiah, the eschatological man, in whom the pattern of suffering and vindication, of tribulation and salvation, has to play itself out. So Jesus fulfils the prophecies: humiliated and exalted, surrounded by saints and ringed by sinners, clothed with light, yet wrapped in a garment of darkness.