

December 14, 2003

St. Venantius Fortunatus the Hymnographer

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

It is often remarked that the omission of the Transfiguration account from the Fourth Gospel is properly explained by the fact that Jesus *always* appears transfigured in that gospel. In its every scene, including the Passion narrative, Jesus is suffused with the radiance of the divine light. "We beheld His glory," says St. John in the prologue, "the glory as of the only begotten of the Father" (1:14).

That prologue, which sets the theme for the entire story, is peculiar to John. His gospel otherwise adheres to the exact time span covered by the earliest apostolic preaching, namely, "all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism by John to that day when He was taken up from us" (Acts 1:21-22). Adherence to this same time frame is characteristic of the message of Peter and Paul (10:36-42; 13:23-31), as well as the earliest of the gospels, Mark. So too John, except for his prologue.

Matthew and Luke had expanded that original time frame by adding the stories of Jesus' conception, birth, and infancy. John's prologue, however, escapes the confines of time altogether, rising to God's eternity, where "in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). Only then does this gospel begin to speak of the ministry of John the Baptist (1:6,15).

The Jesus presented in John's gospel, then, is the eternal Word, in whom "was life, and the life was the light of men" (1:4). Becoming flesh and dwelling among us (1:14), He is the living revelation of God on this earth. Even though "no one has seen God at any time," John says, "the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him" (1:18).

These themes will appear again in the Lord's last supper discourse and the long intercession that He prays at the end of it. There will He speak of His being "the way, the truth, and the life" (14:6) and refer to the glory that He had with the Father before the world began (17:5,24).

John's contemplative gaze at the glory of God on the face of Jesus also determines other features of his gospel. We observe, for instance, his treatment of Jesus' miracles. Although his narrative very intentionally includes fewer of these than do the other gospels (20:30; 21:25), John provides them greater theological elaboration.

John limits the number of recorded miracles, which he calls "signs," to the sacred figure seven. These seven signs, which lead to the commitment of faith, commence with the fine wine of the wedding feast: "This beginning (*arche*, the same word as in 1:1) of signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested his glory; and His disciples *believed* in Him" (2:11). The second sign John identifies as the curing of the nobleman's son (4:46-54); as in the first case, the man himself "*believed* and his whole household" (4:55). Next comes the curing of the paralytic at the pool (5:1-15), followed by the miracle of the bread (6:1-14), the walking on the water (6:15-21), and the healing of the man born blind (9:1-41). The final and culminating sign is the raising of Lazarus from the dead (11:1-44).

John's recording of these revelatory signs is accompanied by theological comments on their significance, either in the detailed conversations of the narrative itself (as in the raising of Lazarus and the healing of the blind man) or by the Lord's own further elaboration (as in the Bread of Life discourse). Thus, each of these events in the Lord's life and ministry becomes a window through which we perceive the divine glory, and Jesus is transfigured with light through the whole narrative. In addition, two lengthy conversations, one with Nicodemus (3:1-21) and the other with the Samaritan woman (4:5-42), sound the depths of the revelation that takes place in the narrative.

At the end of the seven signs, John summarizes the tragedy of the unbelief with which the enemies of Jesus responded to His revelation (12:37-41). This unbelief leads immediately to the Lord's Passion, which is introduced by the great last supper discourse.

In every scene, then, from the Lord's appearance at John's baptismal site, all the way through the Lord's death and resurrection, the divine light appears among men. John records

all these things that we readers too may "believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God" (20:31).

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