

August 12, 2007

The Sunday after the Transfiguration

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Although the Apostle Paul did not write of the Lord's Transfiguration on the mountain, one is forcefully reminded of that event by a passage in the Second Epistle to the Corinthians. He wrote, "For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts unto the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (4:6).

Paul's reference to the glory of God shining on the face of Christ, which perfectly expresses what the evangelists describe in the Transfiguration, is even more striking by reason of its immediate context. Just a few verses earlier Paul had written, "But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transfigured (*metamorphoumetha*) into the same image from glory to glory, as by the Spirit of the Lord" (3:18, my translation). That is to say, Paul's reference to the glory of God on the face of Christ is set in the context of our own transfiguration in Christ. The verb he uses here, *metamorphomai*, appears in only three other places in the New Testament, two of them descriptive of the Lord's Transfiguration on the mount (Matthew 17:2; Mark 9:2).

As in Luke's account of the Transfiguration, Paul's development lays special stress on the Christian understanding of the Old Testament. Indeed, he introduced this subject of transfiguration by treating of biblical interpretation. The Jew, Paul wrote, understands only the "letter" (*gramma*) of the Old Testament, whereas the Christian understanding penetrates more deeply to "the Spirit" (*to Pnevma*). The first kind of biblical understanding leads to death, he affirmed, the second to life (2 Corinthians 3:6-7). That is to say, Paul's preoccupation here is the orthodox understanding of the Bible.

His initial reflections on this subject next prompt the Apostle to remember the special glory that had shone from the face of Moses on the mountain. Step by step Paul then goes from the glory on the face of Moses to the glory on the face of Christ.

He begins by observing that "the children of Israel could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of the glory of his countenance, which was passing away" (3:7). Even this fleeting glory on the face of Moses had to be covered by a veil. Moses, the Apostle explains, "put a veil over his face so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the end of what was passing away" (3:12).

That veil over Moses' face becomes, for Paul, a symbol of the Jews' failure to grasp the significance of their own Scriptures. This terrible (but tear-able) veil is the exegetical impediment that divides Jew from Christian: "But their minds

were blinded. For until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament, because it is taken away in Christ. But even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart" (3:14-15).

What is the advantage, then, of the Christian in this respect? It is Christ's removal of the hermeneutic veil, to reveal the Spirit's understanding of the Old Testament. This veil is lifted when a person is converted to Christ through the Gospel. He now understands the Scriptures correctly: "Nevertheless when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty" (3:17).

This Spirit-given understanding of the Holy Scriptures in Christ is the context in which Paul proceeds to write of Christian transfiguration: "But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transfigured (*metamorphoumetha*) into the same image from glory to glory, as by the Spirit of the Lord."

>From the face of Christ, this ever increasing glory shines into the heart and transfigures the Christian's mind. It delivers believers from those darkening forces that blind those "who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them" (4:4).

Similar in this respect to Luke's account of the Transfiguration, Paul considers the glory on the face of Christ as throwing light on the Bible, penetrating beneath the grammar. This is orthodoxology, the study of the correct glory, removing the veil of exegetical blindness. This Spirit-given glory sheds its light on the writings of Moses and the other biblical writers. It is "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

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