

A SERMON OF ST LEO ON THE TRANSFIGURATION¹

TODAY'S gospel reading, dearly beloved, as it reaches our ears and strikes on the hearing of our minds, calls upon us to understand a great mystery. And with God's help we shall the more easily achieve this if we turn our attention to what is related shortly before. Jesus Christ, the saviour of the human race, before he instituted that faith which brings back sinners to righteousness and the dead to life, surrounded his disciples with prophetic instruction and with mighty works, so that they should believe that one and the same Christ was both the only-begotten of God, and son of man. For one of these without the other is of no profit for salvation. It is equally perilous, whether we believe that our Lord Jesus Christ is God and not man, or man and not God. We must confess both, for just as true humanity is united in him to divinity, so is true divinity united to humanity. To strengthen, then, the health-giving knowledge of this faith, the Lord asked his disciples what, apart from the various opinions of others, they themselves believed about him, what they thought him to be. At that, the apostle Peter, transcending human and earthly things, by the revelation of the Father on high, perceived with the eyes of his mind the Son of the living God; he acknowledged the glory of the divinity because he saw further than flesh and blood. And in this exalted faith he was so pleasing to God that, endowed with heavenly joy, he received divine strength to become the immovable foundation-stone of the Church. So would the Church conquer the gates of hell and the laws of death, and heaven would ratify only those judgments of binding and loosing which issued from Peter's authority.

Nevertheless, dearly beloved, the very loftiness of his understanding, praiseworthy though it was, had still to be instructed in the mysteries of lower things. For the apostle's faith, raised to the glory of believing the divinity of Christ, might think it unworthy and unfitting that the impassible God should take on human weakness. So he might come to believe that in Christ humanity had already been so glorified that it could neither be afflicted by suffering nor dissolved by death. And so the Lord told

¹ Sermon 51 (P.L. 54: 308-313).

them that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer much from the elders and scribes and high priests, and be killed, and on the third day rise again. Peter was still filled with heavenly light and burned with his ardent confession of the Son of God; and with (as he thought) a loving and impetuous concern, he would not accept the insults of Christ's mockers and the shame of his cruel death. But he was checked by Christ's rebuke, and filled with desire to suffer with him. For our saviour's words instructed and inspired them to follow him, to deny themselves, and for hope of eternal things to bear the loss of the earthly. He at last will save his life who does not fear to lose it for Christ's sake.

In order then that the apostles might be filled with buoyant, steadfast courage, so that they might not waver at the bitterness of his approaching cross, nor be ashamed at Christ's sufferings, nor reckon as ignominious the patience by which he was about to bear the violence of his passion and win the glory of his power, Jesus took Peter and James and John his brother, and going up on to a mountain with them alone, showed them the brightness of his glory. For though they knew that the majesty of God dwelt in him, they were still ignorant of the power of his body by which the divinity was clothed. But he had already clearly and precisely promised (Matt. xvi, 28) that there were some of his disciples standing there who would not taste death till they had seen the son of man coming in his kingdom—that is, in his kingly glory, the glory of his assumed humanity which he chose to show to these three men. For no mortal man still living can have that immediate and unutterable vision of God which is laid up in eternity for those who are pure in heart.

To his chosen witnesses, then, the Lord revealed his glory. His bodily form, which he shares with us, he made to shine with such splendour that his face became bright as the sun and his clothing white as snow. And in this transfiguration his foremost purpose was to remove the scandal of the cross from the disciples' minds. The degradation of suffering freely accepted would not disturb the faith of those to whom the excellence of his hidden dignity had been made known. But no less truly by his providence, the hope of the Church also was established; the whole body of Christ was to see the transformation it would receive, and the members be promised a share in the honour displayed in the head. Already the Lord had foretold this when he spoke of his coming in

glory: 'Then shall the just shine as the sun, in the kingdom of their father' (Matt. xiii, 43). And St Paul said the same: 'For I reckon that the sufferings of this time are not worthy to be compared with the glory to come, which shall be revealed in us' (Rom. viii, 18). And again: 'For you are dead; and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ shall appear, who is your life, then you also shall appear with him in glory' (Col. iii, 3-4).

Another element in this miracle added to the strengthening of the apostles and their growth in wisdom. For Moses and Elias, that is the law and the prophets, appeared, speaking with the Lord; so in the presence of those five men these words are most surely realized: 'in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word shall stand' (Deut. xix, 15). What word is more firmly established than that which is preached by the voice of both old and new testaments, when the ancient prophecies concur with the gospel message? The pages of both covenants conspire together; and he whom the former signs promised under mysterious veils, the splendour of this present glory now openly makes known. For as St John says: 'the law was given by Moses; grace and truth came by Jesus Christ' (John i, 17). The promise of the prophetic figures and the meaning of the Mosaic law are both fulfilled in Christ; for he seals the truth of prophecy by his presence, and renders the commandments possible by his grace.

The revelation of these mysteries so stirred the apostle Peter that, spurning earthly things, he was carried away by an ecstasy of longing for the eternal. Filled with the joy of the entire vision, he wanted only to stay where the sight of Jesus' glory gave such happiness. 'Lord', he said, 'it is good for us to be here: if thou wilt, let us make here three tabernacles, one for thee, one for Moses, and one for Elias.' Our Lord made no reply, hinting that Peter's desire was not wrong but out of place. The world could not be saved but by Christ's death, and the Lord's own example is echoed in the faith of believers; for we may not doubt the promise of beatitude, yet must know that throughout our present troubled life patience is demanded of us before glory. The joys of the kingdom cannot precede the time of trial.

While Peter was still speaking, a luminous cloud overshadowed them, and a voice spoke from the cloud: 'This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased: hear ye him'. The Father was present in the Son; in the Lord's splendour which was

shown to the disciples, there was no separation of the Father's essence from his only-begotten Son. Yet each Person is denoted distinctly; the bodily glory shows forth the Son to our sight, while the Father is brought to our hearing by the voice from the cloud.

When they heard this voice, the disciples fell on their faces in fear, not only of the Father's majesty but also of the Son. With their understanding now deepened, they knew the one divine nature of both Persons; and just as there was no hesitation in their faith, so there was no distinction in the reverence they paid to each. Manifold and embracing was the testimony which the Father bore to his Son, and greater in the force of the words than in the sound of the voice. 'This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased: hear ye him.' It is as though he said: 'This is my beloved Son who is of me and with me eternally. The Begetter was not before the Begotten; the Begotten does not come to be after his Begetter. This is my Son who is not separated from me in divinity, nor divided from me in eternity or power. This is my Son, not an adopted but a true Son; not created apart from me but generated by me; not made like me though of a different nature, but born of my essence and wholly equal to me. This is my Son by whom all things were made, and without whom nothing was made (John i, 3). For all that I do, he does likewise, and in all my actions he too acts with me, inseparably, identically. For the Son is in the Father and the Father in the Son (John v, 19), and never can our oneness be divided. And though I who generate am one and he whom I generate is another, you may not withhold from him what you know to be true of me. This is my Son, who did not clutch at his equality with me nor grasp it selfishly (Phil. ii, 6); but remaining still in my glory, he humbled the unchangeable divinity to the form of a servant, to fulfil our common purpose of the salvation of mankind.

'Hear him eagerly, then, him in whom I am in every way well pleased, in whose preaching I am revealed, in whose lowliness I am glorified. For he is truth and life, he is my power and wisdom. Hear him whom the mysteries of the law foretold, whom the prophets heralded with one voice. Hear him who with his blood redeemed the world, who bound down Satan and released his treasure store, who tore up the treaty of transgressions and the signature of sin. Hear him who opened the road to heaven,

who by his suffering and cross built up the steps which lead us to his kingdom. Why do you fear to be redeemed? Why shrink to be free from sin? Do what Christ wills in union with me. Cast out this fleshly fear, arm yourselves with steadfast courage, for it is unworthy to have fear at the time of Christ's passion, when even about your own end you should, through his gift, have no anxiety.'

All this was said, dearly beloved, not to be of value only to those who heard it. The whole Church learned whatever those three apostles saw or heard. Let the faith of all be strengthened, then, by the gospel preaching, and may none be ashamed of Christ's cross by which he redeemed the world. Let no one fear to suffer for justice's sake or hesitate about the promised reward, for by labour we come to rest and by death to life. For he took on himself the whole of our poor wretchedness; and if we stay firm in acknowledgment and love of him, we too will conquer as he conquered and will receive his promises. Whether in obeying his commands or in bearing hardships, may the Father's words be always sounding in our ears: this is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased; hear him, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit for ever and ever. Amen.



GAMALIEL

(Questions should be addressed to *Gamaliel*, c/o the Editor, THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT, *Hawkesyard Priory, Rugeley, Staffs.*)

GAM. But the fact is they are not. I find that little preliminary parenthesis of yours rather touching, Ed. 'Questions should be addressed . . .'. Why should they? Especially if there aren't any.

ED. I must admit, I *am* rather disappointed. I thought in my innocence, when we started this questions and answers section, that you would be overwhelmed with questions.

GAM. The faithful multitudes, greedy for knowledge, flocking to the oracle.

ED. Perhaps that is part of the trouble. The only answers people want are oracular answers, and they find they don't get them from you.