

Listen to Jesus and follow him. That's the message of the Transfiguration.

Pope Francis, 1936–

Related topics

For further study:

Transfiguration; glory; discipleship

Closing Prayer

Glorious God,
on the holy mountain
you unveiled the splendour of your only Son
in whom is the fullness of the Law and prophets.
Shine in the heart of your people
and fan to flame in them
the gifts of your Holy Spirit,
that what they have heard and seen
they may go out and proclaim
as witnesses to the good news of your glory
in Jesus Christ, who lives for ever and ever.

*Celebrating the Christian Year, Year B, Sunday next before Lent,*²

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² *Celebrating the Christian year : prayers and resources for Sundays, holy days and festivals, years A, B and C* / compiled by Alan Griffiths. – 3 vols. – Norwich : Canterbury Press, 2004-5.

The Sunday next before Lent

Principal Service readings

2 Kings 2.1-12	Elijah is taken up to heaven
Psalm 50.1-6	Our God will come and will not keep silence
2 Corinthians 4.3-6	God has shone in our hearts
Mark 9.2-9	The Transfiguration

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ,
speak to our hearts in the stillness,
keep us steadfast in the foundation that cannot be shaken,
lift up our eyes to behold the vision of your glory;
and perfect our faith, now and always. Amen.

Society of Saint Francis

Gospel Reading

The Transfiguration

³Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, ³and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. ⁴And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. ⁵Then Peter said to Jesus, ‘Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.’ ⁶He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!’ ⁸Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

⁹As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

Mark 9.2-9 NRSV¹

Comments and Questions

The episode in Mark traditionally thought of as the transfiguration actually has three elements. In Mark 9.1 (immediately preceding today’s

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reading) Jesus speaks of the imminent coming of the kingdom. Then there is the narrative about transformation or transfiguration (9.2-8), followed by a discussion between Jesus and his disciples about Jesus as the suffering Son of Man and John the Baptist as an Elijah figure (9.9-13).

Perhaps Mark has put the three elements together. In any case they show some central themes of his gospel: the mystery of the kingdom of God, and the place of Jesus suffering, death, and resurrection within it. The saying about the imminent coming of the kingdom (9.1; see also Matthew 24.34; Luke 21.32), along with Mark 13.30 and Matthew 10.23, provides the strongest evidence that Jesus thought of the kingdom of God as imminent. Although most commentators attach the verse to 8.34-38, it also acts as a bridge and gives context to the narrative of the transfiguration.

The story of the transfiguration of Jesus (9.2-8) describes the setting and the brilliant figure of Jesus (9.2-3), the appearance of Moses and Elijah, as well as Peter's suggestion (9.4-6), the cloud and the voice coming from it (9.7), and the abrupt ending of the event (9.8). The incident raises the question of what genre it belongs to. Is it a historical narrative? Is it a resurrection appearance? Is it an apocalyptic vision? There is value in considering each of these.

It certainly has aspects of the supernatural, such as the 'brilliance' of Jesus. As a narrative event it certainly has elements that go beyond the capacity of a historian to record it: the symbolism of the high mountain, the transfiguration itself, the appearance of Moses and Elijah, and the heavenly voice.

Some commentators think that the transfiguration story was originally a post-resurrection account that has been read back into the pre-resurrection period of the life of Jesus. In its favour, it fits well with descriptions of the appearance of the risen Christ (for example, Acts 9.3; 22.6; 26.13), and it makes sense of the disciples' amazement. However, some post-resurrection features are missing, especially the theme of mission. In this view it can be seen at least as a preview or anticipation of the glory of the risen Christ.

Some commentators regard the transfiguration as an apocalyptic vision, such as one finds in Daniel, revealing earthly events from a heavenly perspective. Matthew 17.9 explicitly describes the experience as a 'vision'. This view helps to explain the supernatural elements as well as the eschatological perspective. But there is no first person narrative, no 'I saw ...', nor an angelic interpreter or explanation of the vision.

Whilst each of these three views helps to explain something of the event, perhaps it is best to regard it as a manifestation or revelation of who Jesus really is. It is like a 'theophany', in which God reveals his won self to human beings (see for instance, the encounter between God and Moses in Exodus 3). In the transfiguration Jesus is shown as a glorious figure, someone on a level with, or even superior to, Moses (representing the law) and Elijah (representing the prophets). He is called 'Son of God' by a heavenly voice. The transfiguration gives a glimpse of Jesus' true identity and the glorious goal to which his journey will lead. The disciples, meanwhile, are understandably puzzled, and react with a mixture of awe and foolishness. Jesus is presented as like Moses (there are many parallels with Exodus 24 and 34).

The discussion between Jesus and his disciples (9.9-13) relates Jesus' identity to the mystery of the cross and to Elijah/John the Baptist. A central feature of the incident is the instruction from the cloud 'listen to him' (9.7), which will help the disciples to see the current episode as a prelude to the coming in full of God's kingdom. This involves the 'brilliance' of Jesus and the persistence of the mystery of the cross.

Quotations

1

God places us in the world as his fellow workers-agents of transfiguration. We work with God so that injustice is transfigured into justice, so there will be more compassion and caring, that there will be more laughter and joy, that there will be more togetherness in God's world.

Desmond Tutu, 1931–