

The Transfiguration of the Lord

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Daniel 7.9-10, 13-14

2 Peter 1.16-19

Luke 9.28-36

Now it happened that as he was praying alone the disciples were with him. [...] And he said to them, “But who do you say that I am?”. And Peter answered, “The Christ of God”.

Now about eight days after these sayings he took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray.

Words from the gospel according to St Luke, the ninth chapter.

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Gods are to be found on top of mountains. Everybody knows that. Zeus rules from atop Olympus; Shiva the Destroyer meditates on Kailāśa; Sun Wukong, the Monkey King, was born from a stone on Huāguo. On Mount Sinai, Yahweh dictated the law to Moses and came to Elijah, not in the furious wind that split the hills, nor in the earthquake that followed, but in the soft whisper of a voice.

“Who do you say that I am?” he asks.
“The Christ of God”, we reply, not knowing what we are saying.

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Christian theology, like Christian discipleship, is a quixotic enterprise that begins by asserting its own impossibility. God is not only that being greater than which none can be conceived, but also that which is simply inconceivable.

That this is so is hardly surprising. After all, our brains evolved to deal with medium-sized objects located in time and space. Being the source of all things, including time and space themselves, God cannot be counted among objects, medium-sized or otherwise. Much more so than even the weird and wonderful things posited by theoretical physicists—that pantheon of fermions and bosons; those n -dimensional space-times—God is a mystery beyond our telling, the mystery of existence itself.

All of this is just to say that whatever it might mean to *know God*, it cannot be like knowing anything else. This can be seen in the way theology is actually done. One model is presented to us at the end of the gospel reading: *they kept silence*. Their stunned silence was temporary, but since the days of the early church, silent

contemplation and adoration has become, in some circles, the ultimate goal of theology. But another model is exemplified for us in the reading from the book of Daniel: here, the author is not silent, but is desperate for words, furiously drawing from various aspects of the created world to express something of God. There is snow and wool; there are wheels and flames, thrones and multitudes, ever world without end. The Church has always lived in both these modes: responding to the Word God speaks, who is Jesus Christ, with her own babblings and her sighs too deep for words, both supplied by the Holy Spirit.

For Christians then, the route to knowing God is not—for the most part—to scale mountains uninvited: not ours are the stories of Babel and Bellerophon. Rather, our knowledge of God begins and ends with God's self-revelation and invitation

to us into the divine life. The Spirit helps us in our weakness, intercedes for us. We are brought to the mountain to pray with Jesus.

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It is easy enough to see that the story of the Transfiguration is about *revelation*: Jesus of Nazareth is revealed as the Giver of Light, the fulfilment and consummator of both Law and Prophecy, the very Son of very God.

It is also easy to see how this revelation is meant to *reassure* the disciples, in the harsh and cruel shadow of the Cross, upon which their would-be Messiah was broken, and with him, their hopes of new life. “We have the prophetic word made more sure”, they told themselves, “we were there with him on the holy mountain; we heard this voice: *this is my beloved Son*”. Despite all

appearances to the contrary, our faith is true: or so the experience of the Transfiguration allows us to say.

But we pass too quickly by what Moses and Elijah were talking to Jesus about: his departure, which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem. To put it more bluntly: his *death*. Paradoxically then, in this scene—in which Christ is revealed in cosmic splendour, and the voice from on high confirms his Divine Sonship—it is the mortality, the finite humanity of Jesus, that is the topic of conversation.

We must, therefore, not misunderstand the Transfiguration as a demonstration that the Second Person of the Trinity is merely temporarily pretending to be a human being, Jesus of Nazareth. The comfort we derive from this event must not be based on the notion that when Jesus suffers and dies on the Cross, he

does not *really* die, but only appears to. No: the Transfiguration is precisely a repudiation of this heresy that we call *Docetism*. It is also a repudiation of a tempting view of the Christian life associated with this and other similarly dualistic heresies. In all three Synoptic Gospels, Peter is recalled as having said to Jesus, “It is well that we are here; let us make three booths”, the implication being that they should *stay* there, on the mountain, and at least Moses, Elijah, and Jesus ought to have shelter. But this God is not to remain on the mountain top, far from the troubles of the world: this God has gone already to the hill-country and will go now into the city, to be mocked and tried, tortured and murdered. In the same way, *we* are not to stay on the mountain, above the fray—good though it surely is to be there—but to follow our Lord wherever he may go, which is everywhere on earth, even to its hells.

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Christian theology is like Christian discipleship, because that's what it is.

Knowing God is not like knowing other objects, because God is not an object.

Talking about God is not like talking about other objects, for the same reason, but also because the goal of theological speech is not merely unilateral declaration, in which an active human subject makes assertions about a passive divine object. Christian knowledge is, in this sense, decidedly *not* power, if power is power *over* something or someone else. Rather, it is a response to the Word God utters, even from creation.

Finally, to know and respond to God is to *live*. The voice from above the mountain

says “This is my Son”, but also “Listen to him”: revelation entails commission. To see God—in the transformation of dull flesh into dazzling light, or in the pillar of cloud that envelops us, or in bread and wine made holy for us—(to see God) is to see a lamp shining in a dark place until the day dawns and the morning star rises in our hearts. Lamps are not just for staring at in silent adoration or just for propositional predication; lamps are first and foremost for *following*, as they light our path. The Transfiguration of the Lord is therefore not merely for our intellectual benefit—now we know what it means *semantically* to say that Jesus is the Christ—but for our own *metamorphosis* into the very likeness of this Jesus.

Thus, whether we think we are learned or ignorant, loquacious or economical, to know and respond to God is to be transformed and, in so being, to transform

the world. Quixotic, to be sure: and yet, no less than the very meaning of our confession that Jesus is the Christ of God.