

Feast of the Transfiguration

August 6th

Today's Feast is a wonderful gift because it helps us in a special way to look forward to heaven. St John in his first Epistle says "When Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is." The Transfiguration is therefore important in our lives because it helps us to realize two things. First it affirms the divinity of Christ and secondly it anticipates our own divinization.

The way through this life to that divinization is of course the way of the Cross.

Jesus told his disciples of his forthcoming Passion and of the suffering He would undergo at the hands of the Jews and Gentiles. He exhorted them to follow him on the way of the Cross and of sacrifice. A few days later, at Mount Tabor, He wants to strengthen their faith.

St Thomas Aquinas teaches that for one to advance directly along a particular path, it is important to know the destination beforehand, just as the archer does not accurately launch an arrow without first looking at the target. This is necessary, above all, when the road is rough and hazardous, and the path laborious. It is fitting, therefore, for Christ to reveal to his disciples the splendour of his glory, to become transfigured before them, since in the same glory he will one day transfigure us. Our life is a roadway to heaven, but one that passes by way of the cross and through sacrifice. Until our final moments, we shall have to swim against the current.

St Peter in today's Epistle gives us clear direction as to how we can swim against the current of the culture and so reach our own Mount Tabor – that is heaven and share in the transfiguration that we celebrate today. He reminds us that the Transfiguration of Jesus affirms that Christianity is an historical faith, an intelligent faith and is an orientating faith.

First Christianity says St. Peter is historical:

¹⁶ For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. ¹⁷ For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." ¹⁸ We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.

Notice that Peter refers to two of our senses in these verses: He says they had been eyewitnesses of Jesus' majesty and they heard the voice of the Father. Clearly Peter is challenging those who accused him of myth telling. The word "myth," found elsewhere in the New Testament only in the Pastoral Letters (1 Tim 1:4; 4:7; 2 Tim 4:4; Titus 1:14), indicates in this context an unreal, fabricated story about the gods or divine activity. No says Peter we witnessed his glory by what we saw and heard therefore affirming the historicity of this event.

Peter also reminds us that Christianity is intelligent because it full engages the intellect.

So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed.

What prophetic message is he referring to? Remember on Mount Tabor that Moses, the Law Giver and Elijah, the first of the Prophets appeared with Jesus talking about his exit. The prophets were always to interpret and apply the Law that had been given to Moses. Now says Peter the fullness of this Old Testament Witness comes together in Jesus. Notice that in the Gospel we are told that Moses and Elijah withdraw and in the end the three see only Jesus. To fully embrace Christianity involves an understanding of the sweep of biblical theology. The more fully we understand the Faith the more vital our relationship with Jesus will be because we understand how the fullness of the biblical witness culminates in Him.

Which leads to the third and final point: Not only is Christianity historical and intellectual it is also orientating. It is like a compass that helps to locate us in the present as we are on the roadway to heaven.

You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.

The prophetic message of Scripture will serve as a lamp until the “day dawns.” This is a reference to the coming of the Lord himself and the dawn of the new age. The image of the “morning star” can be applied in two ways. First, the rising of the actual morning star, that is, the planet Venus, announces that day is at hand. This is entirely appropriate as an image of Christ’s return heralding the new age. Second, “the morning star” is also an indirect reference to Num 24:17, the promise that “a star will rise from Jacob.” Here the “morning star” refers specifically to the promised king, the †Messiah, who will come and redeem his people (see Rev 2:28; 22:16 for Christ as the morning star).

Those who live attentive to the faith in its historical and intellectual dimensions will in turn be so orientated in this life that when the morning star finally dawns in our own hearts all that we have hopefully believed in this life will be realized and we will be like Jesus because we will see him as he really is.