

The Transfiguration Of The Lord

A Sermon by Rev Kurt H. Asplundh

"A bright cloud overshadowed them; and suddenly a voice came out of the cloud, saying, 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!'" (Matt. 17:5)

Our subject is the Transfiguration of the Lord, that amazing event recorded in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, when the Lord was transformed before the eyes of Peter, James and John. We will consider this in four parts, each answering a question: First, what took place and how did it actually happen? Second, what did it teach about Jesus? Third, what is its representative meaning? And fourth, What does it mean for us? What did happen?

The Lord, with His disciples, had come into the region of Caesarea Philippi, a city north of the land of Israel situated at the headwaters of the Jordan River. Nearby were the slopes of Mount Hermon rising to snowcapped peaks. We can remember this mountain from the 133rd Psalm which speaks of the delightful "dew of Hermon" descending on the mountains of Zion. Choosing Peter, James and John who accompanied Him on other intimate occasions, the Lord went up onto this mountain to pray. The disciples, seemingly dozing off after their climb, suddenly became fully awake to observe that their Lord's face was altered as He prayed, now shining like the sun; and His clothing glistened with whiteness, like the snow, beyond any imaginable whiteness of clean linen. Also, the disciples saw two men whom they recognized as Moses, their ancient lawgiver, and Elijah the prophet, who appeared in glory and spoke with the Lord of His forthcoming death in Jerusalem.

Peter, overwhelmed at this wondrous sight, said, "Lord, ... let us make here three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." (Matt. 17:4) As he said this, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!" (Matt. 17:5). All three disciples heard this and fell on their faces, greatly afraid. When the Lord came to touch them and raise them up, the vision had ended. He was alone, no longer surrounded by flaming glory and glistening light.

What happened on this occasion was a real experience, not a dream or hallucination. The three disciples were introduced briefly into conscious life in the spiritual world. Their spiritual eyes were opened and, for a few moments, they saw as the angels see: beholding the deeper spiritual qualities of their Lord that are visible in that superior realm. Indeed, the disciples saw the face of the Lord like the sun because His Divine love shines forth in the spiritual world as a sun. The doctrine of the New Church teaches that He is seen by the angels above the heavens, encompassed by the flaming brilliance of His own Divine love.

Spiritual visions are common in Scripture, especially with the prophets, and these took place through an opening of spiritual senses latent in us all but now opened only rarely. For example, John experienced visions when banished to the Isle of Patmos. Again, "in the spirit," as at the time of the transfiguration, having his spiritual eyes opened, He saw the Lord as a Divine Man, "His eyes like a flame of fire," His hair "as white as snow."

Having considered so far what actually happened at the transfiguration, let us now ask what it teaches about Jesus. The voice from the cloud which put the disciples into a state of such profound humility and fear identified him as the "Son of God." "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!" (Matt. 17:5)

Who is this "beloved Son"? The doctrine of the New Church describes Him as the "Divine Human," God in Human form. "Before the Lord came into the world He was present with men of the church but only medially through angels who represented Him; but since His coming He is present with men of the church immediately, and this because in the world He put on also a Divine Natural [form] in which He is present with men." (TCR 109) Jehovah God put on a degree of life called the Natural, "thereby becoming Man, like a man in the world," we are told, "but with the difference that in the Lord this degree ... is infinite and uncreated ..." (DLW 233, emphasis added) He made His Natural Divine.

We are told that while the Lord "was indeed born as is another man, ... this human the Lord entirely cast out, so that He was no longer the son of Mary, and made the Human in Himself Divine ...

and He also showed to Peter, James, and John, when He was transfigured, that He was a Divine Man." (AC 4692:5) "It was plainly the Divine Human of the Lord that was thus seen" and identified by the voice heard from the cloud as the "beloved Son" (AE 64:3). Many gospel teachings show the importance of this recognition of the Divinity of Jesus; from John, for example, where it says that "No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son ... He has declared Him." (John 1:18) Again, "Jesus said ... I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6). In another instance, when the disciple Philip said to Jesus: "Lord, show us the Father ... " He answered: "He who has seen Me has seen the Father... " (John 14:9) "I and My Father are one," He said. (John 10:30)

"They who are truly men of the church ... are acquainted with and acknowledge a Trine" we are told in the Writings of the New Church. "But still they humble themselves before the Lord and adore Him alone, for the reason that they know that there is no access to the Divine Itself which is called the Father' except through the Son, and that all the holy which is of the Holy Spirit proceeds from Him. When they are in this idea they adore no other than Him through whom and from whom all things are, thus One." (Arcana Coelestia 2329:4)

We turn now to the third question of our consideration. What was the representative meaning of the transfiguration? We must preface this by pointing out that every account in Scripture has a representative or parable-like sense. This is illustrated by the Lord's parables which contained a deeper meaning. In some places, the prophets "acted out" a style of life that demonstrated the state of the nation. What they did had symbolic meaning.

In a similar way, the transfiguration of the Lord represents the transformation of the Word. In fact, everything that is said in this account about the Lord can be understood as referring to the Word and our reception of it.

Consider these parallels. Jesus was present in an external body. So, too, the Word of Scripture is an external body of history, laws and prophecy. Jesus revealed a Divine spirit within His body.

So, too, the Word of Scripture has a spirit of truth. When the disciples went up onto the mountain, their vision was opened to see Jesus in a new way. When we climb above mundane thoughts and concerns, we elevate our mind to a state in which we can be given a new vision of the meaning of the Word.

"The Word in its glory was represented in the Lord when He was transfigured" (True Christian Religion 222; Doctrine Concerning the Sacred Scripture 48). We are told in different words that "when the Lord was transfigured, He presented Himself in the form in which the Divine truth is in heaven" (Apocalypse Explained 624e). In other words, He caused Himself "to be seen as the Word" (Apocalypse Revealed 24).

It is significant that the two men seen talking with Jesus were Moses and Elijah, both closely linked with the Word of Scripture. Moses obviously represents that part of the Old Testament we call "the Law," while Elijah represents the Prophets (see also Apocalypse Explained 624e).

Moses and Elijah, when talking to Jesus "spoke of His decease." (Luke 9:31) The parallel representation is that the Law and the Prophets of Scripture treat of the Messiah, some prophecies specifically foretelling His death.

An important representation or parallel is to be found in the fact that a cloud overshadowed the disciples during the transfiguration. Matthew's gospel describes this as a "bright cloud." We think of a puff of cloud momentarily enveloping a group of climbers on a mountain slope, a cloud penetrated by the sun's rays, bright but obscuring the sight of nearby objects. It was from such a passing cloud that the voice was heard saying: "This is My beloved Son." (Mark 9:7; Luke 9:35)

We are reminded here of other instances in Scripture where clouds are mentioned: how Mount Sinai was covered by clouds when Moses went up to receive the Commandments; the promise that the second coming of the Lord would be "in the clouds of heaven" (Matt. 24), as it is said:

"Behold, He is coming with clouds, and every eye will see Him ... " (Revelations 1:7)

While the transfiguration of the Lord represents the Word in its glory, the overshadowing cloud represents a particular aspect of the Word called in New Church doctrine the "sense of the letter" (Doctrine Concerning the Sacred Scripture 48), or Divine truth in its outmost or literal meaning. (Apocalypse Revealed 24)

When we read of anything in Scripture, as we read here of clouds, we can interpret the meaning on different levels literal or symbolic. For example, to believe that Christ will return to earth surrounded by clouds when the Last Judgment is at hand is to think literally. We can also think of the same statement symbolically.

The Writings of the New Church have much to say about the symbolic or representative meaning of clouds. This comes from the fact that clouds appear in the spiritual world as well as in the natural world, "but the clouds in the spiritual world appear beneath the heavens, with those who are in the sense of the letter of the Word, darker or brighter according to their understanding and reception of the Word ...consequently bright clouds' are the Divine truth veiled in appearances of truth ... and dark clouds' are the Divine truths covered with fallacies and confirmed appearances ... " (Apocalypse Revealed 24)

When the Word is read according to this spiritual representation, we can see new meaning in the account of the overshadowing cloud. It refers to an obscure understanding of Divine teachings. It represents truth veiled over with appearances drawn from a literalistic understanding of the Word. Here is an illustration: When the Lord spoke to Nicodemus about being "born again," Nicodemus wondered how it would be possible to enter again into his mother's womb (John 3:4). He took the statement literally. The Lord intended it symbolically.

Consider another example: The Lord once said He would raise up the temple in three days if it were destroyed. Many took His words literally, wondering how He could do this when the temple had taken

46 years to build. But He spoke of the temple of His body and His resurrection in three days. (see John 2:19-21)

Now when the bright cloud overshadowed the disciples, the symbolic meaning is that the church at that time (which the disciples represented) "was only in truths from the sense of the letter" of the Word (Apocalypse Explained 594a).

The remarkable thing to note, however, is that the voice which identified Jesus as the "beloved Son" came from the cloud. This revelation, so crucial to Christian belief, is powerfully given in the sense of the letter of the Word rightly understood. The Writings give this explanation: "The bright cloud' which overshadowed the disciples' represented the Word in the sense of the letter; so from it a voice was heard, saying, This is My beloved Son; hear ye Him,' for no announcements or responses are ever made from heaven except through outmosts such as are in the sense of the letter of the Word, for they are made by the Lord in fullness." (Doctrine Concerning the Sacred Scripture 48, emphasis added; see Arcana Coelestia 9905)

This teaching that Divine revelations must be made in the statements of Scripture is illustrated in the parable of Lazarus and the beggar. Lazarus, the rich man who went to hell, pleaded with Father Abraham to send someone to his brothers on earth to warn them of this fate. The answer was: "They have Moses and the Prophets If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead" (Luke 16:29-31). Unless revelations are stated in and confirmed by truths in external form, they have no power. When presented in that form they have awesome power and effect. Thus, it was that Peter, James and John humbled themselves profoundly when the voice came out of the cloud. It was not only the voice that affected them, but the message: that their Lord was Divine Man God in Human form!

What, then, does all of this mean for us? What spiritual benefits come from reading about and understanding the transfiguration of the Lord? There is a sense in which we can put ourselves in the place of Peter, James and John and be witness to, and profoundly moved as they were by, a miraculous transformation of our understanding of the Word. The transformation for us is in the mind. First it is seeing the

glory flaming in the cloud seeing the spiritual sense of the Word within the letter which gives it Divine life; for as the apostle Paul said to the Corinthians, "The letter kills but the Spirit gives life." (2 Corinthians 3:6)

There is a wonder here a miraculous transformation of Scriptural teachings that have meant little or nothing to us now suddenly glowing with Divine love and enlightening our minds with Divine wisdom. Second, it is sensing a holy fear at the presence of the Lord in His Word. It is humbling ourselves before Him, being willing to serve and obey Him. It is saying to the Lord and really meaning it, "Not my will but Thine be done!"

Lastly, it is being touched by Him and lifted in spirit by His presence and His words. For He said, "Arise, and do not be afraid" (Matthew 17:7). When we consider the entire sweep of the Lord's ministry and its impending conclusion, do we see a reason He brought these disciples to the mountain for His transfiguration? Would the experience strengthen them for the days ahead, for their lives as apostles? Do not we need such strength for the days ahead? Do not we need the same encouragement to learn and live our faith? We do!

What a comfort it must have been to Peter, James and John, being greatly afraid during the transfiguration, to have Jesus afterward touch them and say, "Arise, and do not be afraid." They lifted their eyes and saw no one but Jesus only. (Matthew 17:7, 8) Here is a representative parallel for us. He is all we need. In our times of fear and need the Lord Jesus Christ can touch and comfort us. He extends His Divine mercy and love to us wherever we are spiritually because He has drawn near by assuming our nature.

This is what the transfiguration can mean to us. It can mean a renewal of our religious resolve and a rededication to the worship of the Lord Jesus Christ in His glorified Human.

Amen.

Lessons: Exodus 19:9-11, 16-20; Matthew 17:1-9; Apocalypse Revealed 24