

Transfigured

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According to the Church calendar, today is “Transfiguration Sunday”, for those congregations that adhere to the Revised Common Lectionary, and form part of Western Christianity. It marks the end of the Season of Epiphany, and functions as a transition point between it and the Season of Lent, which begins Ash Wednesday. Celebrated since the late fourth century, it commemorates the full revealing of Jesus’ identity, first seen at his nativity on what is now Christmas Day, and later affirmed by the visit of the Magi “from the East”, on what is termed Epiphany, arising from the Greek word *epiphaneia*, meaning “to make manifest” or “reveal”. Its purpose is to remind those of the Christian faith, and even those who are not, that in and through the person of Jesus we see the Divine fully displayed. The narrative describing the event is found in all three synoptic Gospels, with Matthew perhaps the most extensive and indicative of its meaning. In all cases, it’s shown as literally “earth-shattering” for the disciples, who, until then, had failed to fully comprehend the nature of the rabbi or teacher they had chosen to follow. Even afterwards, subsequent to being presumably informed of the event by those present, they still by and large remain ignorant of his person, and the path on which he is proceeding. Only in retrospect does it become apparent they have been in the presence of someone who not only was the long-awaited Messiah, but in some mysterious way, also the very incarnation of the God in whom they believed and worshipped. For them, as often may be true for each of us, the journey to a deeper understanding of his person and what it means to follow him, can be full of twists and turns, confusion and complexity, until we catch a glimmer of who he was and the purpose of his life, death, and resurrection. And like them, as we come to grasp the significance of his person and its implications, we too may be transformed.

The narrative of the event actually begins a number of verses prior to our Gospel reading for today. Jesus along with his disciples arrive in the district of Caesarea Phillipi six days prior, where he poses the question about his identity, asking “who do the people say that he is”. Several reply that some think he may be John the Baptist, others that he is the prophet Elijah, and yet others that he may be Jeremiah or one of the other prophets. He then asks them “but who do you say that I am?”, to which Simon Peter declares that he is none other than “the Messiah, the Son of the living God”. Jesus then emphasizes that his answer is not the result of “flesh and blood”, but by way of that same living God’s intervention, enabling Peter to identify him as such. He then states that upon Peter’s confession “he will build his church and the Gates of Hades will not prevail against it”, although our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters may insist that it is upon Peter himself that it is to be built. After outlining that he will give Peter, and presumably the other disciples, the keys to the kingdom of Heaven, and all that comes with them, Jesus “sternly orders” the lot “to not tell anyone that he was the Messiah “. Several further discourses subsequently occur, where Jesus describes to the disciples what he must undergo upon entering Jerusalem, and the cost anyone must be prepared to pay if he or she wishes to follow him. He then takes those disciples closest to him – Peter, James, and his brother John – and leads them to “a tall mountain” nearby. Although usually assumed to be Mount Tabor, in all likelihood it was Mount Hermon, given its proximity to Caesarea Phillipi,

and also to that of the city of Dan, the northernmost point of the United Kingdom under Kings David and Solomon, symbolic of the expanse of the nation under both. The mountain was also the highest in the land, surpassing that of Mount Tabor, by almost eight thousand feet.

Together with the city of Bethel, located just north of Jerusalem, Dan was the site where Jeroboam I established a sanctuary complete with an altar for the worship of Yahweh - in the form of a golden calf - following the division of Israel into Northern and Southern Kingdoms. Although traditionally associated with the Canaanite god Ba'al, it's now recognized that such graven images were found throughout the region at the time, given their ability to symbolize strength and fertility, traits desired by those who then projected onto them the god of their choice. Worship involved the provision of sacrifice and participation in other rituals designed to please the deity and thereby obtain his or her blessing, fostering the procurement of whatever was sought in terms of material benefit. Although common practice among the peoples who lived outside of Israel, within the nation such idolatry was understood to violate the covenant established between it and Yahweh, as the creation of any image believed to represent the god who lead them out of Egypt contravened the Written Law. To consolidate the Northern Kingdom, and encourage its inhabitants to shun worship at the temple in Jerusalem, Jeroboam and the majority of the Kingdom's rulers thereafter nonetheless supported such idolatry, in spite of repeated efforts by such prophets such as Amos and Hosea who spoke against it, and the injustices born out of a singular focus on the seeking of wealth, power, and influence at the expense of the poor and marginalized. And, because of its inequity, as predicted by those same prophets, the Northern Kingdom came to an end in 721 BCE, after the Assyrians captured its capital at Samaria, deported its ruling elite and the majority of its population, and re-settled its territory with people from other regions of its empire. Similar would happen to the Southern Kingdom, some thirty-five years later.

Constructed by Herod Philip, son of Herod the Great and tetrarch or governor of what had been the northeast region of his father's kingdom, Caesarea Philippi was located at the foot of the southern slope of Mount Hermon. Named also after himself, to distinguish the city from Caesarea Martima on the coast, it was the capital and administrative centre of the region, in addition to being a major shrine for the worship of the god Pan, attracting many from throughout the Greco-Roman world. Formerly called the city of Panaeas because of this, the temple built to honour him was found at the entrance to a cave, in which was located a fathomless pool, believed to be an entry point into the underworld. It was named "the Gates of Hades", after the god who ruled over it, a place both feared and dreaded, given its reputation as the realm of the dead, where life and its enjoyments came to an end. Known as the god of "wild places", the fields and forests of the natural world, Pan reveled in the company of fellow god Bacchus or Dionysus, and liked to not only party whenever possible, but also pursue romantic interests both far and wide, regardless of potential consequence. The name from which the word "panic" is derived, he was understood to possess the innate ability to disrupt civilization, symbolized by the law and order of the Roman Empire, and was as equally feared and dreaded for the havoc he could consequently spread, through the demons at his command and available to do his bidding. And he was perceived to have gained control over anyone who exhibited

wildly irrational or uncontrolled behaviour, much like would be found in any of the parties of which he was so fond, resulting in a literal pandemonium among those involved.

But the narrative of the Transfiguration does not end with Jesus and the three disciples descending from the mountain where the event occurred. Upon reaching its base they're met by a crowd, out of which comes a man who pleads with him to cure his son, whose erratic behaviour causes him "to often fall into the fire and often into the water", not only resulting in "terrible suffering" for him, but also endangering his life; indicative that he was under the sway of the god Pan. After admonishing the disciples for their inability to heal the boy themselves, in spite of what they've just experienced, he then "rebukes the demon, who comes out of him, and is cured instantly". Jesus subsequently chastises the disciples for their lack of faith. His frustration is tangible, as he emphasizes that even with faith no more than "the size of a mustard seed", it's possible for them to figuratively move mountains, and thereby do the work of the God in whom they believe and worship. In a world full of a multitude of gods and their servants, this was crucial if the "Good News" was to take root through its proclamation by word, and its demonstration by miracle, encouraging adoption of a different approach to life, other than one born out of enslavement to that which impedes, that which constricts or that which impairs, resulting in impoverishment of body, mind, and soul. And the same is no less true today. Although the gods and demons of the world of late antiquity may have been banished, together with the idolatry associated with them, others have arisen in their place, offering the possibility of acquiring whatever may be our hearts' desire, whether it be power, influence or wealth, thereby encouraging us to re-order the environment around us to our benefit, regardless of its impact on the poor, the marginalized or the disenfranchised. But thanks be to God, there is another way, one in which all may flourish, based on that which liberates, that which frees, and that which unbinds, namely the love that seeks to benefit our neighbour as ourselves, made manifest most poignantly on the Cross. AMEN.